

## CONTEXT AND SETTING

This section of the resource demonstrates the following concepts

- Context: is critical to the variety of meanings that are made through texts
- Representation: in representing the world composers and responders construct, co-construct, deconstruct and reconstruct meaning in and through texts.
- Intertextuality: every text is in dialogue with other texts. These dialogues may be explicit, implied or inferred.

### Clarifying the difference

*The Crucible* is an excellent text to help students clarify the difference between context and setting. To enable them to see the play with only their present contextual understandings, you may want them to view the play or the film before introducing the context activities below. This would highlight the importance of the context of composition to the ways we compose and respond to texts.

Resources that may assist:

Arthur Miller and Joseph McCarthy -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiTNBD0372I>

- *Are you now or were you ever*: An excellent essay on the period by Arthur Miller in 2000 which considers the context of the play from a more contemporary perspective. The reference to the attitude towards Russia during the Second world War, only a few years earlier, explains some of the support for communist principles that faded once Stalin's true methods eventually came to light and helps foreground the sense of incomprehension by the saner members of the Salem Community.

<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/miller-mccarthyism.html>

In today's terms, the country had been delivered into the hands of the radical right, a ministry of free-floating apprehension toward anything that never happens in the middle of Missouri. It is always with us, this anxiety, sometimes directed towards foreigners, Jews, Catholics, fluoridated water, aliens in space, masturbation, homosexuality, or the Internal Revenue Department. But in the 50s any of these could be validated as real threats by rolling out a map of China. And if this seems crazy now, it seemed just as crazy then, but openly doubting it could cost you.

So in one sense *The Crucible* was an attempt to make life real again, palpable and structured. One hoped that a work of art might illuminate the tragic absurdities of an anterior work of art that was called reality, but was not. It was the very swiftness of the change that lent it this surreality. Only three or four years earlier an American movie audience, on seeing a newsreel of Stalin saluting the Red Army, would have applauded, for that army had taken the brunt of the Nazi onslaught, as most people were aware. Now they would look on with fear or at least bewilderment, for the Russians had become the enemy of mankind, a menace to all that was good. It was the Germans who, with amazing rapidity, were turning good. Could this be real?

Arthur Miller, 'Why I wrote *The Crucible*', *The New Yorker* 1996 at the time of the release of the film of the play  
<http://www.plosin.com/beatbegins/archive/millercrucible.htm>

## Understanding the setting

While *The Crucible* has a specific setting and context, its ideas are universal in scope and timeless in application. Arthur Miller's notes give us a great deal of insight into the "sect of fanatics" who populated Salem in 1692. The isolation of such a community is hard for a modern audience to imagine, but also then how much more intense must the sense of being truly chosen and called by God to tame, enlighten an unknown new world must have been. It is also easy to understand how God's providence or punishment could be seen in the everyday successes and failures of people living in such a difficult terrain, where they "had to fight the land like heroes" for their very survival. On the other hand, it is also difficult to imagine why with so much unclaimed land at their disposal, so much of *The Crucible's* friction is based on land ownership within a very small area, but then, as Miller writes, 'in unity still lay the best promise of safety... [and] the edge of the wilderness was close by.'

Miller writes of 'the dedicated folk' of Salem in the opening pages of the play and it is clear that their world view was structured around a God who is present in all facets of human endeavour and experiences, showing divine displeasure and even retribution through the events of the play, as stated by Hale. Active religious belief is a part of all aspects of town life and there is no distinction between being religiously orthodox and communally focused – 'going upright in the world' was one and the same thing.

The autocracy that they established was done with the people's consent, with the core unifying factor of shared ideology, 'whose perpetuation was the reason and justification for all their sufferings.' Despite their unity, they also had deep antagonism for each other, as is outlined by Miller in the slights and recriminations around Putnam, Parris and Giles Corey, going back generations and the restrictive social codes by which they lived came to be restrictive of individual freedoms. As Miller writes, 'the Salem tragedy... developed from a paradox... a theocracy... whose function was to keep the community together... but all organization is and must be grounded on the idea of exclusion and prohibition... and the repressions of order were heavier than seemed warranted by the dangers against which the order was organized.'

### Student Activity

1. What was McCarthyism?  
Do a Google search on McCarthyism using such terms as 'McCarthyism', 'Hollywood Red Scare', 'McCarthy conspiracy theories' etc. When you have a general understanding of what the term means, choose the document, image, video or spoken text that you found most helpful and, after some class discussion of your findings, post your information on a shared drive.
2. The list of points below come from Miller's introduction to *The Crucible* and give you a sense of the fear and strict laws that governed that theocratic society. This is the setting of the play.

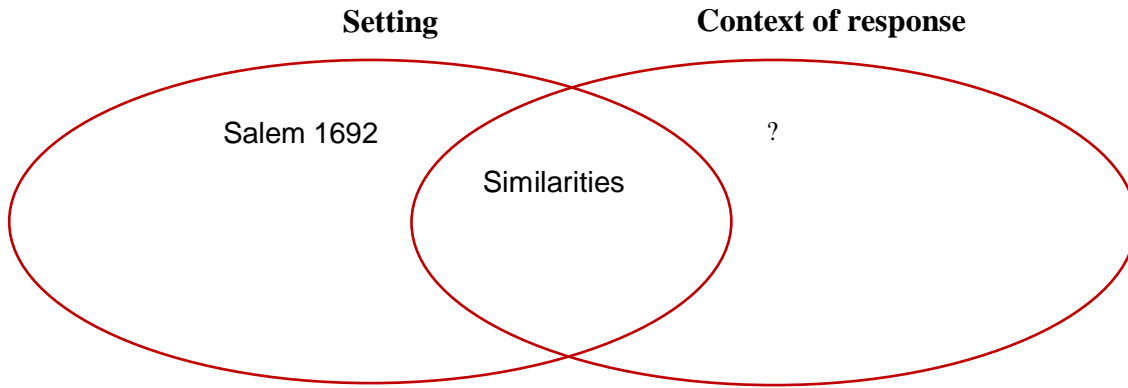
Consider the setting, Salem 1692 in the light of the context of the writing of the play, America 1952. Which elements of the McCarthy era correspond, literally or metaphorically, to the conditions in Salem and to what extent? Complete the table below.

The Crucible - setting	The Crucible - context
A sect of fanatics	
Forced to fight the land for every grain of corn	
Predilection for minding other people's business	
The time of the armed camp had almost passed	
Dark and threatening, over the shoulders, night and day	
Virgin forest, the Devil's last preserve	
Held in their steady hands that candle that would light the world	
Self-denial, purposefulness, suspicion of vain pursuits, hard-handed justice	
A time of confusion brought by deep and darkling forces	
Exclusion and prohibition	
Repression heavier than the dangers warranted	
Greater individual freedom	
Satisfaction at confessing sin and guilt	
Long-held hatreds of neighbours	
Land-lust.	

Class discussion

- In what ways is context different from setting?
- How does the context of composition influence the nature of the setting and the action that occurs within it?

Now complete the diagram. The context of response could be 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia or any other culture in which *The Crucible* was performed.



- How does the context response influence representation and reading of the play?

### Student activity

The choice of scene in a play is an important component of the representation of human experiences. The various locations in *The Crucible* contribute to our understanding of the relationship of individuals to the Salem community. Act Four is the climax of the play focusing on the relationship between individual and collective experiences.

Consider how the opening of each Act establishes the action in a particular location:

- Act 1 – *A small upper bedroom in the home of the Reverend Samuel Parris.*
- Act 2 – *The common room of Proctor's house*
- Act 3 – *The vestry room of the Salem meeting house*
- Act 4 – *A cell in Salem jail*

1. While we begin the play in Betty Parris' bedroom the critical action immediately before the play begins is in the forest outside the town. What does the forest symbolise in traditional tales? How does this symbolism fit in with the theme of the individual's place in society?
2. What is the common element between the locations in Acts 1-2? What does the 'private' nature of these settings suggest about the characters and their relationship with the community?
3. What effect does the public and 'spiritual' location have on the judgements passed by the court in Act 3?
4. What does the jail setting in Act 4 imply about the relationship between the individual and the collective?

### Activity:

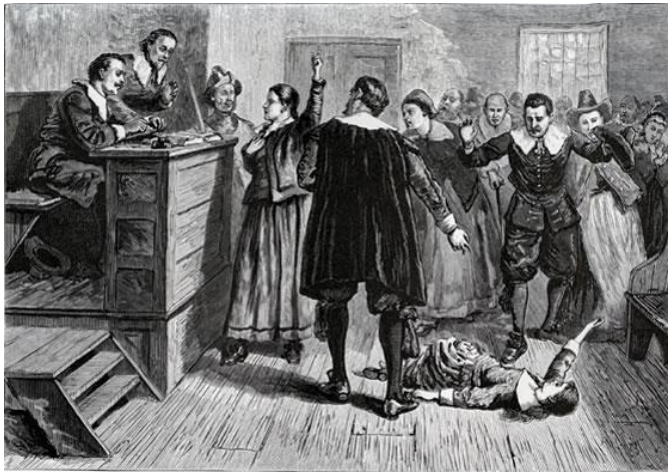
In groups, brainstorm ways that the individual is different from the collective. Find quotes from the text to support these ideas.

Choose one of your ideas and write a paragraph that explores the representation of the individual in relation to a collective and consider what it is saying about the human experience.

## POLITICS LANGUAGE AND POWER

*The Crucible* can be read as a play about politics as it examines the relationships of power between people and between institutions. Miller's play goes beyond 17<sup>th</sup> century Salem to shed light on political manipulation and persecution occurring in different times and places.

In the play, power structures shift significantly but are personified by a range of individuals as the action of the drama unfolds. Firstly, Reverend Parris, whilst unpopular, is deferred to in his role as minister, although his suspect motives and squabbling over money quickly illuminate the true nature of his character. John's evident dislike of Parris cements his moral authority early in the play and characterises him as the representative figure of his community, thus the tragedy that befalls him is potentially universal. The arrival of Reverend Hale presents another aspect of power, in that of authoritative knowledge and his presiding over Tituba and later Abigail's confession confirms his suspicions, but, as the proceedings become increasingly out of his control he confronts how ineffective that knowledge is and is tormented by his guilt for the deaths of innocents. Similarly, the legal authority personified in Danforth is seen as callous and mindless, debasing him and the proceedings. All representations of institutional power are corrupted as the play progresses and John's acceptance of death before indignity asserts the transcendent morality of the honest individual in the face of corrupt authority.



WITCHCRAFT AT SALEM VILLAGE

This corruption is repeated whenever power adheres to people who are not able to wield it with fairness, equity or understanding. Their actions disrupt the steadiness of society and, by focussing on this period of destabilisation and change, literature can draw connections across times and space. "Witch hunts" continue to this day in some form and the language of witch hunts echo through time.

There is always a devil, some aspect or group of society that is identified for vilification, and often confession wickedness by the 'sinner' is required to reaffirm the strength and virtue of the threatened system. The trial and punishment are often public and as a form of ideological control rather than for the purpose of seeing justice being done.

Image: An 1876 depiction of the Salem witch trials.

*(Photo: William A. Crafts (Vol. I Boston: Samuel Walker & Company) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons)*