The Crucible Background: Arthur Miller and Puritans

**Background**: Take notes in the space below.

- *The Crucible* written by Arthur Miller in 1953
  - *crucible* = a time or place of extreme difficulty, where something new is born
- **Allegory** for *McCarthyism*
  - Allegory = story with a dual or hidden meaning
    - While play is apparently about the Salem witch trials, it's also about the political situation of Miller's time
  - In 1953, America involved in Cold War against Soviet Union (present-day Russia)
    - Fear that whole world would turn communist and lead to downfall of democracy
    - Politicians like Joseph McCarthy warned of the “enemy within” and encouraged Americans to turn in possible traitors
    - U.S. Congress established House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), which tried Americans suspected of being communists (Reds)
    - Arthur Miller tried by HUAC and was **blacklisted** (legally denied work) because he refused to provide the committee with more names of people to arrest
    - In *The Crucible*, Miller relates the Puritans' **paranoia** (irrational fear) of witches in the 1600s to Americans’ fear of communists in the 1950s

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**From “Why I Wrote the Crucible,” Arthur Miller, 1996**

*The Crucible* was an act of desperation. By 1950, when I began to think of writing about the hunt for Reds in America, I was motivated in some great part by the paralysis that had set in among many liberals who, despite their discomfort with the inquisitors' violations of civil rights, were fearful, and with good reason, of being identified as covert Communists if they should protest too strongly.
The Red hunt, led by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and by McCarthy, was becoming the dominating fixation of the American psyche. It reached Hollywood when the studios, after first resisting, agreed to submit artists' names to the House Committee for "clearing" before employing them.

In those years, our thought processes were becoming so magical, so paranoid, that to imagine writing a play about this environment was like trying to pick one's teeth with a ball of wool: I lacked the tools to illuminate miasma. Yet I kept being drawn back to it.

I visited Salem for the first time on a dismal spring day in 1952; it was a sidetracked town then, with abandoned factories and vacant stores. In the gloomy courthouse there I read the transcripts of the witchcraft trials of 1692, as taken down in a primitive shorthand by ministers who were spelling each other.

The more I read into the Salem panic, the more it touched off corresponding ages of common experiences in the fifties: the old friend of a blacklisted person crossing the street to avoid being seen talking to him; the overnight conversions of former leftists into born-again patriots; and so on.

I am not sure what *The Crucible* is telling people now, but I know that its paranoid center is still pumping out the same darkly attractive warning that it did in the fifties.

1. According to this excerpt, why did Miller choose to write about his experiences through the lens of Salem rather than writing about them directly?

2. What are some examples of modern-day "paranoia?" What groups of people are Americans currently taught to fear (by the news, by the government)? How are we taught to fear them?

Explore: In order to make *The Crucible* believable, Miller conducted research on Puritan life in Salem.

3. Look at the materials on page 95 of your Springboard. How are these documents different from modern-day children's books? What do they suggest is important to Puritan society?
Background: Because church attendance was mandatory in Puritan society, sermons, or lessons given by pastors, were an important tool for maintaining unity and order in Salem. “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” by Jonathan Edwards, is one of the most famous sermons, and one source where Arthur Miller gained inspiration for The Crucible.

4. Complete the following table based on the ideas the sermon presents about God and human nature.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptions of God</th>
<th>What does this evidence mean? What does it show about how Puritans see the world?</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Descriptions of humans</th>
<th>What does this evidence mean? What does it show about how Puritans see the world?</th>
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Quickwrite: How might the attitudes and feelings reflected in this sermon connect with a belief in witchcraft? Use examples from the sermon to support your ideas. (3-4 sentences)