

The Crucible, Act I, by Arthur Miller

Cross-Curricular Connection: Social Studies

The climate of fear and false charges about which Arthur Miller writes in *The Crucible* reflect the climate of suspicion he lived through in the 1940s: the period of McCarthyism. The word *McCarthyism* came from the name of Joseph R. McCarthy, a Wisconsin senator who made numerous charges—usually with little evidence—that certain officials and individuals were communists or cooperated with communists.

McCarthyism developed during the Cold War, an era of great hostility between the communist and noncommunist nations of the world. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, communists took over Czechoslovakia and China, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, and the Soviet Union equipped the North Korean communist forces that invaded South Korea. Because of these and other events, many in the United States government deeply feared communism and began to investigate its influence, sometimes using questionable methods.

In 1947, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) investigated claims that Hollywood was full of those who advocated the overthrow of the United States. Many writers refused to testify before the committee, and some were blacklisted by the industry and could no longer work. HUAC expanded its investigations. In the early 1950s, Senator McCarthy accused so many people of being communists that the whole era became known as the “McCarthy Era.” His dubious evidence, brutal tactics, and unfair questioning eventually led to his being discredited, but the fear of being labeled a communist caused some people to name others as suspects merely to prove their own loyalty.

Called by HUAC in 1956, Arthur Miller refused to name individuals he had seen ten years earlier at a meeting at which communists were allegedly present. He was convicted of contempt. The conviction was later overturned. In 1957 the first film of *The Crucible* was made in France, because American companies feared to produce it. It took decades for paranoia to subside, and using techniques of unproven charges, guilt by association, and sensational accusation in the media is still known as *McCarthyism*.

Write answers to the questions on a separate piece of paper or via email.

1. Why did some Americans fear communism so much?
2. The USSR was hostile to the United States and doubtless engaged in espionage. What was wrong with the actions of McCarthy and others like him?

3. What similarities do you see between the McCarthy era and the time of *The Crucible*?