The Crucible

- **Author:** Arthur Miller
- **Genre:** drama
- **Themes:** the seductive nature of power; hypocrisy; intolerance; crime and punishment; revenge; sin and guilt; confession; theocracy; the abuses of those with authority; the individual vs. another; the individual vs. society; the individual vs. himself
The Crucible: an allegory

- for the *McCarthy era* (Senator Joseph McCarthy who headed the House Un-American Activities Committee, “the Cold War,” “the Red Scare,” and Julius & Ethel Rosenberg)—and other *witch hunts* of the human population:
  - Hitler & Nazis
  - Racism
  - Anti-government groups, compounds, militia
  - The AIDS scare
The Crucible

- Portrays the familiar human need to prove one’s innocence—even by *falsely accusing* others to do it
  - Still a common human fallacy today
  - *Groundless* accusations are still granted credence
  - *Hysteria* still claims its victims
  - *Persecution* still masquerades as virtue and *Prejudice* as piety

- Throughout history, most accusations of witchcraft have been unfounded and have sprung from irrational fears and social anxieties
The Crucible

- By the end of the 17th century, an estimated 200,000 people worldwide had been executed as witches:
  - Most of the accused were women:
    - Village healers
    - Female land owners
    - Women from lower social & economic standing in the community
- Only the Enlightenment Period in Europe (with its focus on Rationalism, Reason, & Science) brought an end to the “witch hysteria”
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- A **major impetus** for European witch hysteria was a papal bull *Summis Desiderantes* (1484) by Pope Innocent VIII, published as a preface in the book *Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches)* (1486) written by two Dominican Inquisitors.

- Bible scripture, **Exodus 22:18**: “You shall not permit a witch to live.” (NIV version)
In America, prominent Puritan leaders and ministers, Increase and Cotton Mather, both published books “proving the existence of witches” and “explaining the behaviors to be expected from someone who was ‘possessed’ or who was a ‘witch’ ”

**Theocracy:** the complete fusion of church (religion) and state (government)

- The purity of one’s own religious principles is confirmed by participating in, or at least not opposing, the punishment of those who reject the group’s religious principles
The Crucible

- **Crucible**: a place of extreme heat; a severe test
  - An apt definition for Salem, Massachusetts in 1692:
    - The Royal Charter had been revoked; original land titles cancelled and others not yet secured
    - Salem had divided into 3 factions: Salem Village, Salem Town, and Salem Farms
    - Rev. Parris was the 4th minister of the Church of Salem in 7 months
    - The “minding of other people’s business” was a community practice
The Crucible

- A special court was assembled to try those accused of witchcraft in Salem, The Court of Oyer (to hear) and Terminator (to decide):
  - 19 people & 2 dogs were executed for witchcraft
  - 5 people were tortured to death
  - 17 others died in prison
- Most of the accused were women, but eventually, neighbors accused neighbors
  - Opportunity for those so inclined to express publicly his own guilt (confession of sins), under the cover of accusations against the victims
  - Long-held hatred of neighbors could be openly expressed & vengeance taken
  - Land-lust and greed could be satisfied
The Crucible: Tests for Witchcraft

- **Confession** was the strongest evidence against a suspected witch.
- Suspects were examined for the *Devil’s mark*, an abnormal growth that had no sensation (The Devil was supposed to place his mark on anyone who signed a pact with him.)
- **Laying-on-of-hands**, or curing someone by touch, was another widely accepted sign of witchcraft (Suspected witch had to touch an ill person. If person got better, suspect was proved a witch for the “ill spell” returned to the witch at her touch.)
- **Inability to say The Lord’s Prayer** (Witches supposed to say the prayer backwards at their Sabbaths.)
- **The Water Ordeal** was not accepted by colonial courts.
- **Inability to cry** was a sign of witchcraft to many, but considered a superstition by Cotton Mather & other educated people.