

Valeria Torres

Natalia Lopez

Jocelyne Becerra

Mrs. Bailin

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Eras of Despair

At a time when the United States was most vulnerable, the McCarthy hearings of the 1950's unleashed a move to target communism. Senator Joseph McCarthy held trials for those charged with communist ideas, and true panic arose on who would be the next convicted by false terms. The hysteria of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 is clearly reflected in the events that occurred with the McCarthy Hearings, and the similarities between the two events becomes more evident through the drama by Arthur Miller. In fact, *The Crucible* is inspired by the drastic course of events that entitled the McCarthy hearings. The correlation among the two crises includes the effects on the lives and reputations of innocents, the biased and false accusations, the process of investigation and the trials held, and the advantage higher power used to manipulate the ultimate effects of both.

Throughout the Salem Witch Trials and the McCarthy Hearings, individuals saw dreadful consequences that affected their lives with great loss. The horrid long-term consequences they caused included the loss and destruction of careers, family members, financing, property, and reputation. During the McCarthy hearings, the careers of famous actors, writers, directors, and scriptwriters were lost due to false accusations. Larry Parks, a

well known American movie actor, was not allowed to participate in any films after he was accused of being a member of the communist party. The most fortunate ones during the blacklist period were scriptwriters. By using aliases, scriptwriters continued working and developing their career. This strategy was used by several people that were blacklisted during the McCarthy era. It was believed that 10 percent of all the individuals blacklisted were able to return to their careers; however, others suffered unemployment due to their record. In the Salem Witch Trials, the loss of reputation was very common after one was accused of doing witchcraft. In *The Crucible* play, John Proctor despaired, “Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!” (IV, 293). After he is pressured to sign a false confession that will save his life, he refuses to let authorities use his dishonored name to accuse the others of witchcraft. An individual's property and financial wealth was also very significant during both the anti-communist hearings and the witch trials. Once someone was blacklisted, they suffered irreparable financial loss. Giles Corey, from *The Crucible*, refuses to confess or testify to the charges of witchcraft, all so that his son can inherit his property legally. Even though Corey knows this will be the cause of his death, he wants to prevent his son to be stripped of what is rightfully his. During the McCarthy period, many experienced great debt and were unable to keep up with their finances. This affected individuals mentally and physically to the point of losing their families. Despite the differences in time periods, the lies that consisted in both events were targeted at particular groups.

As the false and biased accusations unraveled with both tragedies, the chaos grew similarly. Those that acted in distinct manners from the rest of society were labeled as guilty transgressors. Puritanism restricted anyone from acting extravagantly or immorally in any way, and anyone who did, was unquestionably involved with witchcraft. The McCarthy hearings charged those that seemed too liberal, and this created a big target for people in the entertainment industry. Suspensions aroused within *The Crucible* because of Abigail's rebellious behavior. To protect herself, she cunningly blames another girl, "She sends her spirit on me in church; she makes me laugh at prayer!" (I, 44) Her accusation is taken seriously because it makes more sense that witchcraft is behind her misconduct. Innocent people became incriminated by the strict Puritan ways or the anti-communist beliefs. In the article "*House Un-American Activities Committee*," one can witness the "riding [of] the wave of public anticommunist sentiment" by politicians. Richard Nixon "accused Alger Hiss, a prominent liberal Democrat, of espionage," and he was able to unjustly degrade Hiss through these campaign tactics. In other words, politician results were being manipulated during the McCarthy hearings by targeting opponents who had liberal views. Not only were the false and biased accusations spreading at a rapid rate during these sensitive times, but the manner of investigation and trials held coincided as well.

Several investigations and trials were held to determine if the accused individuals were actually guilty of either communism or witchcraft. Unfortunately, it was hard to defend oneself due to the government's high stance throughout the 1950s and 1690s. Many civilians refused to testify for various reasons; some claimed it was morally wrong to fabricate accusations, while others thought it was properly right to expose it. Hysteria fell

upon the 1950's Hollywood Industry because of the massive fear that communists were infiltrated within the corporation. The HUAC committee began targeting those who demonstrated suspicious un-American activities. *The Hollywood Blacklist* states, "Communists were in a position to place negative images of the United States in films that would have wide international distribution." Playwrights, including Miller, intimidated the mass population through their controversial writing; this resulted in his blacklisting later on. Elizabeth is a suspected character during the trials; she is accused of having a needle inside a poppet that is causing harm to Abigail. Elizabeth is falsely convicted and she is subject to the punishments of the judges in the court. Although many were forced to talk and state their suspicions, the fear to testify remained. Actor Zero Mostel willingly testified against himself with the condition of not naming others due to his moral standards. Giles, from *The Crucible* has the same conviction as Zero Mostel during the McCarthy hearings. Judge Danforth warns Giles that his silence will cause his death but he responds "I cannot give you no name, sir, I cannot" (III, 97). Giles refuses to sentence any name upon the court as it is morally wrong. The proceedings that occurred within the courts were likewise controlled by an overpowering government.

Throughout the McCarthy Hearings and the Salem Witch Trials, those with higher status took advantage of the power in their hands to manipulate the course of events. The government always retained an influential position, and Senator Joseph McCarthy created paranoia by spreading the fear of communism. Abigail's authority allows her to control the town's beliefs. Knowing this, she is able to twist the truth behind the trials. When Mary attempts to reveal her deception, Abigail lies, "Oh, Mary, this is a black art to change your

shape. No, I cannot, I cannot stop my mouth; it's God's work I do" (III, 115). Everyone was convinced that Mary Warren's spirit left her body to do evil. McCarthy manipulated the media, generating panic on conspiracies against the United States. Dominating authorities in the McCarthy Hearings and the Salem witch trials retained their influence over citizens by continuing to create turmoil.

The McCarthy hearings and the hysteria of the Salem Witch Trials produced negative repercussions in society, spreading fear throughout both periods of time. They affected the lives of innocents as well as ruined reputations. The effects during these two events in history were manipulated by the government and other higher authorities, and the procedures of investigation and trials were very similar. While the hearings targeted un-American activities, the witch trials directed their rage at the unethical, proving that both were prejudiced and biased.

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