

The Crucible by Arthur Miller

Video Description

The play, written in 1953, is of the Salem Witch-hunt of 1692 and serves as a parable for the severity of the oppressive atmosphere occurring during the Red Scare years, including Joseph McCarthy's accusations and persecutions and the House Unamerican Activities Committee investigations. The Cold War was in full swing, the Rosenberg's had just been executed as spies and Arthur Miller is witness to the desperation of his time and sees revealing parallels in Puritan New England. Intolerance is rampant in Salem in 1692 and superstition and betrayal are ever present. Repression and violence rise unchecked. John Proctor steps forth to stand against this rising tide of fear, but must confront and struggle with the guilt he feels about his affair with the young girl, Abigail. Power, lust, love and betrayal are important themes, which develop as John admits to his lechery, and he is shamed by Elizabeth's (his wife) loyalty, courage and strength. John Proctor has made decisions and choices, which have destroyed his honor, and he must now reconsider his course of action. In prison he is asked to name others who are possessed and to confess to being in league with the Devil. His name and soul are in jeopardy, and with great individual courage and sense of personal integrity, he refuses to sign and is hanged. Film clips, comments by Miller and discussion by the cast are all sensitive, interesting and important.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will become aware of and will be given insights into the nature of intolerance and persecution; will view and note similarities between 1692 Puritan New England and the United States during the Red Scare years of the 1950's; will evaluate the concept of individual honor.
(Standards 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12)
2. Students will research, analyze, evaluate, write and present on historical or other examples, which might parallel the work of Arthur Miller in *The Crucible*.
(Standards 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12)

Drama Activities

1. Students work in pairs to brainstorm words that they think are important characteristics of personal honor. Choosing and preparing the defense of one characteristic, each pair then tries to persuade other groups that their choice is the most critical. Various persuasive appeals and techniques should be practiced.
2. Have student groups research and find other important historical moments that parallel important issues of the current day. Ask students to prepare and present a performance in which a) a narrative documents the present situation and b) a scripted scene "from the past" sheds light and understanding upon today's dilemma and decision.

These “dramatic vignettes” will serve as a collection of historical insights relevant to troubling contemporary issues.

Oral Activities

1. John Proctor asks the important question, “Who will judge me?” His wife, Elizabeth, responds, “Do as you will . . . It is your soul. I cannot judge you.” The decision is left up to Proctor and it becomes a matter concerning his individual conscience and honor. He chooses death with honor. Ask students to identify and read of other individuals who have demonstrated great courage in going against the grain of public opinion. In large group discussion, have each student role-play and describe their crisis of conscience and the courageous decision she or he made. Others should then pose questions, which appraise the action that was taken. Reinforce that discussion is the goal, not public criticism or censure.
2. Have students locate examples of heroic action in which the individual confronts his group or society and does not walk away or conform. The examples should come from literature, stage, art, music, history, film or current political or social events. A “to share and praise” series of presentations should provide a mosaic comprised of individuality and civil disobedience.

Writing Activities

1. Ask students to write short research papers (2-3 pp.) pertaining to any aspect of the Communist scare of the 1950's or the Salem Witch-hunt of 1692.
2. Have students develop a matrix, a grid, pertaining to three important events or developments in world history. Provide in the vertical column these five repeatable descriptors: problem, fears, action, outcome and current appraisal. Upon completion of the matrix, students should write a one page reaction paper summarizing their findings and conclusions about society's capabilities in dealing with difficult or crisis situations.
3. Ask students to write a persuasive essay about the power of fear in prompting and prolonging intolerance and persecution. They should consider when, where and why, fear has such influence. References should be made to the examples Arthur Miller offers, but students should provide at least one example they have discovered.