

Defining Drama

A drama is a story written to be performed by actors. Like a short story or novel, a drama focuses on characters in conflict. However, unlike prose fiction, a drama presents action through **dialogue**, the conversation and speeches of the characters.

Elements of a Drama

A drama, or **play**, typically includes several key elements.

The **plot** is the ordered sequence of events that makes up the play. A play is often divided into large units called **acts**, which are then divided into smaller units called **scenes**. These divisions were unknown to the ancient Greeks and Romans, but beginning in Elizabethan England, acts and scenes formed distinct units of action in dramatic works.

Characters are the people who participate in the action of the play and are portrayed onstage by **actors**.

- **Dialogue** is the conversation and speeches of the characters. The dialogue of a play may be written in either prose or poetry. All ancient Greek and Roman plays were written in verse, but the transition to prose began in England during the Middle Ages. Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote their plays mainly in verse, but they also included prose passages, usually for the speech of comic and lower-class characters. Today, most plays are written in prose.
- **Stage directions** are notes included in the play to describe the sets, costumes, lighting, scenery, sound effects, and props (the objects used on stage). Stage directions indicate where a scene takes place, how it should look and sound, and how the actors should move and deliver their lines.

Comedy and Tragedy

Ever since the development of Western drama in ancient Greece, plays have been divided into two broad categories.

- A **comedy** is a play that has a happy ending. Comedies often show ordinary characters in conflict with society—conflicts that arise from misunderstandings, deceptions, disapproving parents, or mistaken identities.
- A **tragedy** is a play that shows the downfall or death of the main character, or **tragic hero**. In ancient Greek tragedy, the hero is always a noble person of high rank. The tragic hero's downfall is caused by a **tragic flaw**: a mistake or unwise decision. Sometimes, this mistake is the result of an innate character weakness, such as excessive pride. However, the error may instead result from ignorance—for example, of some crucial

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—Alfred Hitchcock



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piece of information. In modern tragedy, the main character is usually an ordinary person. The cause of the tragedy might be a character flaw, but it may instead be some weakness or evil in society itself.

Other Types of Drama

Not all drama fits neatly into one of these two broad categories. Other types of drama include the following:

- **History plays**, such as many by Shakespeare, are based on events of the past. *The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller, can be considered a history play.
- A **melodrama** features stereotyped characters and exaggerated conflicts.
- A **tragicomedy** combines tragic and comic elements.
- A **modern realistic drama** features ordinary language, realistic characters, and controversial issues.
- A **political drama** reflects the author's opinion on a political theme or issue. An example of a political drama is Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

Dramatic Conventions

Dramatic conventions are literary devices that break the illusion of reality. In a practice called the **suspension of disbelief**, the audience agrees to accept these conventions while watching—or reading—a play.

- A **soliloquy** is a speech in which a character who is alone onstage reveals private thoughts and feelings to the audience. This character may appear to address the audience directly, but it is understood that the audience is overhearing the character talking or thinking out loud.
- An **aside** is a brief remark delivered by a character to express private thoughts while other characters are onstage. Like a soliloquy, it is directed to the audience and presumed to be unheard by the other characters.
- The transition from one scene or act to another might involve a considerable **passage of time** in the plot.

Strategies for Reading Drama

Use these strategies as you read drama.

Visualize the action in performance. As you read, use your imagination to visualize the action onstage. If possible, watch a live performance or a film version of the play.

Analyze the conflict. As you read, analyze how the conflict develops and how it is eventually resolved. Look for the moment when the conflict reaches its greatest intensity or when the main character's fortunes change, for better or worse.

AUTHOR IN DEPTH

Arthur Miller (1915–2005)

A legend of the modern American theater, Arthur Miller has chronicled the dilemmas of common people pitted against powerful and unyielding social forces. A native New Yorker, Miller lived through bad times as well as good. During the Depression, his family's business went bankrupt. Although Miller graduated from high school in 1932, he was forced to delay his enrollment at the University of Michigan for more than two years in order to raise money for tuition. He did so by working at a variety of jobs, including singing for a local radio station, driving a truck, and working as a stock clerk in an automobile parts warehouse.

Promising Playwright

Miller first began writing drama while still in college. In 1947, his play *All My Sons* opened on Broadway to immediate acclaim, establishing Miller as a bright new talent. Two years later, he won international fame and the Pulitzer Prize for *Death of a Salesman* (1949), which critics hailed as a modern American tragedy.

His next play, *The Crucible* (1953), was less warmly received because of its political content. Miller drew a parallel between the hysteria surrounding the witchcraft trials in Puritan New England and the postwar climate of McCarthyism—Senator Joseph McCarthy's obsessive quest to uncover Communist party infiltration of American institutions.

In the introduction to his *Collected Plays* (1957), Miller described his perceptions of the atmosphere during the McCarthy era and the way in which those perceptions influenced the writing of *The Crucible*. He said, "It was as though the whole country had been born anew, without a memory even of certain elemental decencies which a year or two earlier no one would have imagined could be altered, let alone forgotten. Astounded, I watched men pass me by without a nod whom I had known rather well for years; and again, the astonishment was produced by my knowledge, which I could not give up, that the terror in these people was being knowingly planned and consciously engineered, and yet that all they knew was terror. That so interior and subjective an emotion could have been so manifestly created from without was a marvel to me. It underlies every word in *The Crucible*."

In the Shadows of McCarthyism

During the two years following the publication and production of *The Crucible*, Miller was investigated for possible associations

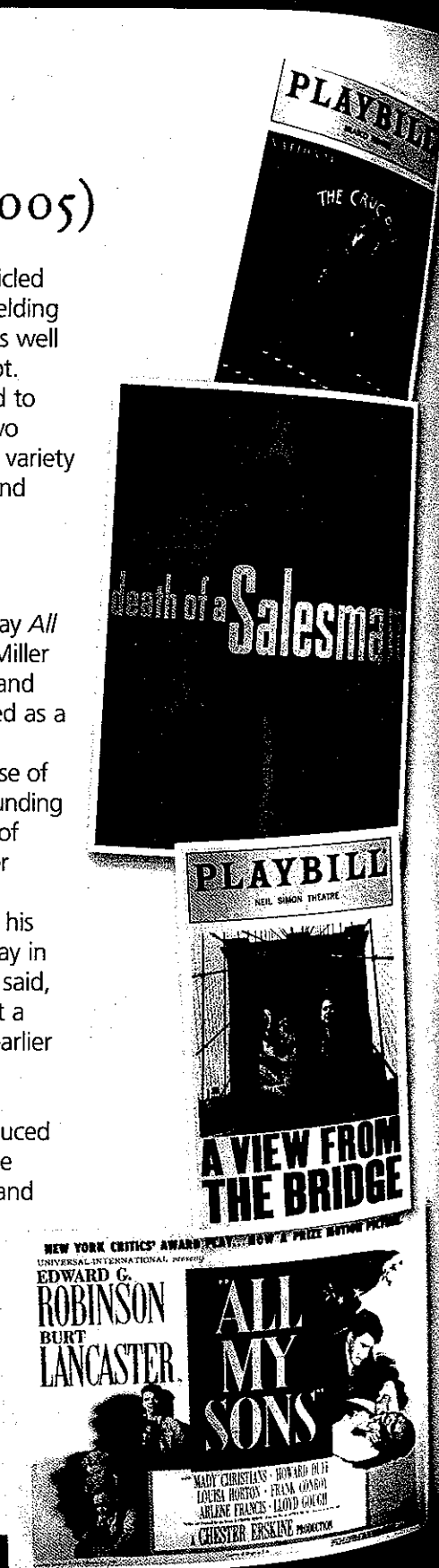
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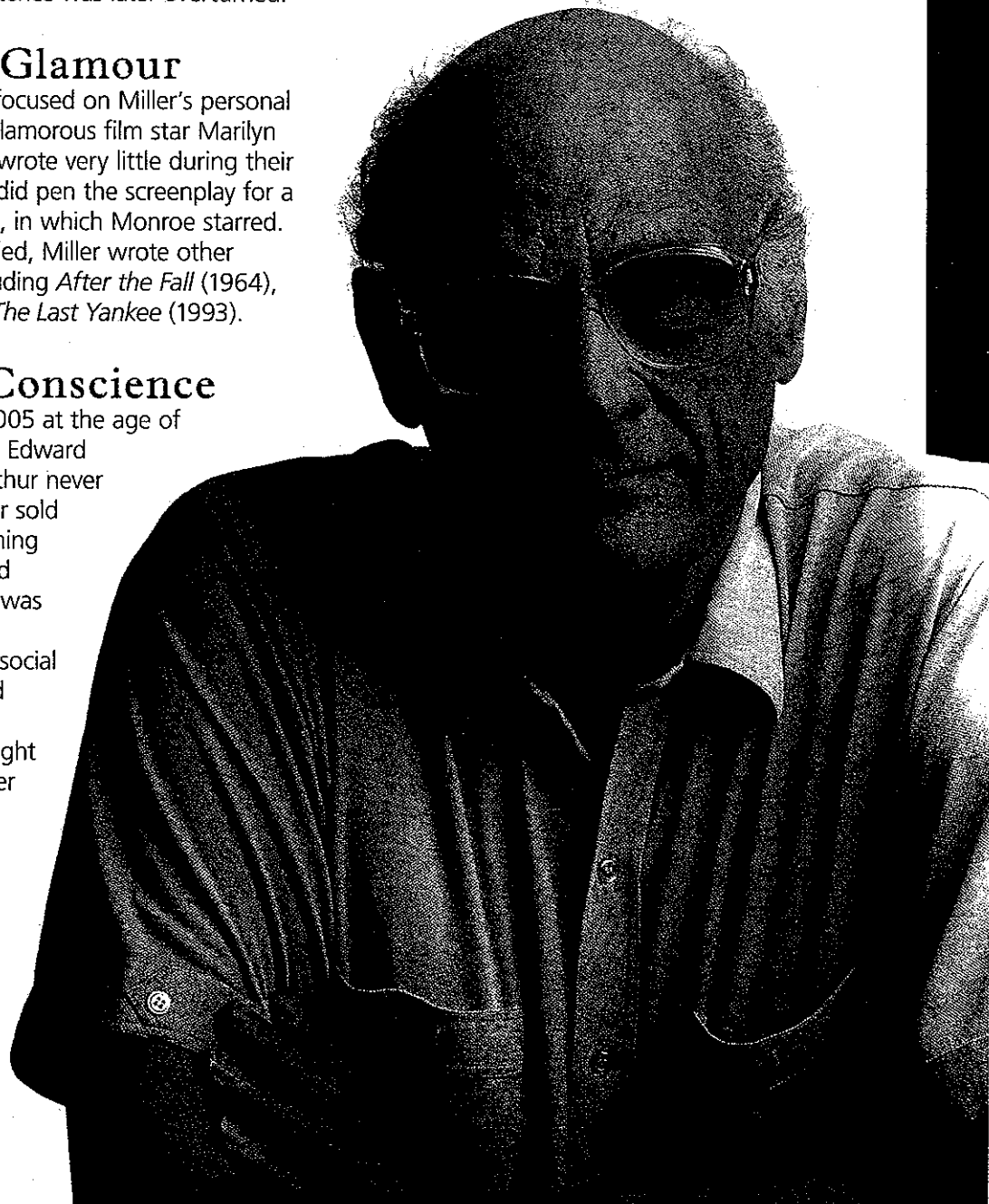
with the Communist party. In 1956, he was called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). Although he had never joined the Communist party, Miller—and many of his contemporaries—had advocated principles of social justice and equality among the classes. He had become disillusioned, however, by the reality of communism as practiced in the Soviet Union. At the HUAC hearings, he testified about his own experiences, but he refused to discuss his colleagues and associates. He was found guilty of contempt of Congress for his silence. The sentence was later overturned.

Hollywood Glamour

In 1956, the spotlight focused on Miller's personal life when he married glamorous film star Marilyn Monroe. Although he wrote very little during their five-year marriage, he did pen the screenplay for a film, *The Misfits* (1961), in which Monroe starred. After the marriage ended, Miller wrote other noteworthy plays, including *After the Fall* (1964), *The Price* (1968), and *The Last Yankee* (1993).

A Voice of Conscience

Arthur Miller died in 2005 at the age of eighty-nine. Playwright Edward Albee said of him, "Arthur never compromised. He never sold out, he never did anything just for that awful word entertainment. . . . He was able to use art and his enormously important social and political points and make them so skillfully that people never thought they were being hit over the head."





Contemporary Commentary

The Words of Arthur Miller on *The CRUCIBLE*

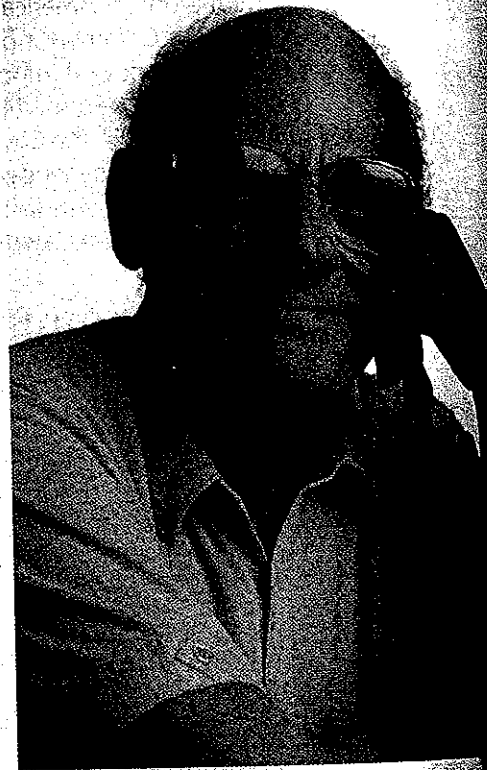
The Historical Background of *The Crucible*

In *Echoes Down the Corridor*, published in 2000, Arthur Miller writes: "It would probably never have occurred to me to write a play about the Salem witch trials of 1692 had I not seen some astonishing correspondences with that calamity in the America of the late forties and early fifties. . . . my basic need was to respond to a phenomenon which, with only small exaggeration, one could say was paralyzing a whole generation and in an amazingly short time was drying up the habits of trust and toleration in public discourse."

"I refer, of course, to the anticommunist rage that threatened to reach hysterical proportions and sometimes did. I can't remember anyone calling it an ideological war, but I think now that that is what it amounted to. Looking back at the period, I suppose we very rapidly passed over anything like a discussion or debate and into something quite different, a hunt not alone for subversive people but ideas and even a suspect language."

The Writing of *The Crucible*

Miller explains where his ideas for *The Crucible* came from, saying, "On a lucky afternoon I happened upon a book, *The Devil in Massachusetts*, by Marion Starkey, a narrative of the Salem witch-hunt of 1692. I knew this story from my college reading more than a decade earlier, but now in this changed and darkened America it turned a wholly new aspect toward me, namely, the poetry of the hunt. Poetry may seem an odd word for a witch-hunt, but I saw now that there was something of the marvelous in the spectacle of the whole village, if not an entire province, whose imagination was literally captured by a vision of something that wasn't there. . . ."



Meet the Author

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* failed at the box office in its initial production in 1953, but it has since become one of the most popular American plays of the twentieth century.



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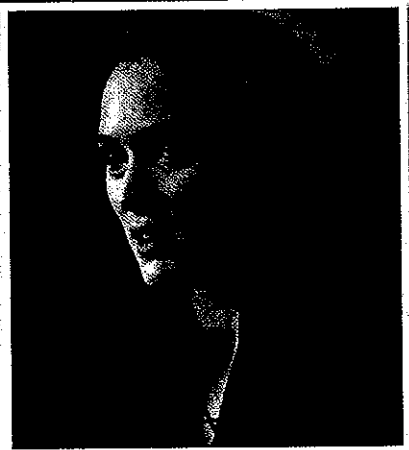
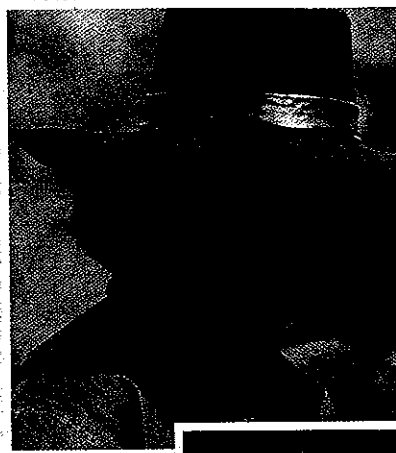
Thinking

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"As I stood in the stillness of the Salem courthouse, surrounded by the miasmic swirl of the images of the 1950s but with my head in 1692, what the two eras had in common was gradually gaining definition. In both was the menace of concealed plots, but most startling were the similarities in the rituals of defense and the investigative routines. Three hundred years apart, both prosecutions were alleging membership in a secret, disloyal group; should the accused confess, his honesty could be proved only in precisely the same way—by naming former confederates, nothing less. Thus the informer became the very proof of the plot and the investigator's necessity."

How the Play Has Lasted

Musing on the eventual popularity of *The Crucible*, Miller says, "*The Crucible* is my most-produced play, here and abroad. . . . And it is part of the play's history, I think, that to people in so many parts of the world its story seems so like their own. . . . In fact, I used to think, half seriously—although it was not far from the truth—that you could tell when a dictator was about to take power in a Latin American country or when one had just been overthrown, by whether *The Crucible* was suddenly being produced there."



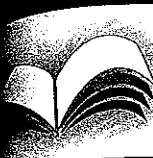
▲ Daniel Day-Lewis as John Proctor and Winona Ryder as Abigail Williams in the 1996 film version of *The Crucible*

Working About the Commentary

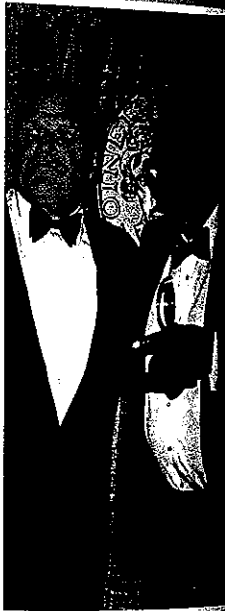
1. **(a)** What experience gave Miller the original idea for *The Crucible*? **(b) Infer:** What aspects of this experience helped Miller connect the Salem of 1692 with the United States of the late 1940s and 1950s?
2. **(a)** What specific similarities does Miller see between the Salem witch trials of 1692 and the anticommunist hearings of the 1950s? **(b) Speculate:** In what ways do you think these similarities have contributed to the fact that *The Crucible* is Miller's most-produced play?

As You Read *The Crucible* . . .

3. Notice how the conflict in the play can represent a universal conflict.
4. Consider ways in which reading this commentary enhances your experience of the play.



George C. Scott
and Arthur Miller



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Connecting to the Essential Question

Write: In this tragic play, characters must decide what it means to do the right thing. What difference is there, if any, between an honorable and a dishonorable sacrifice? Write a brief paragraph to address this question.



Look for It: As you read, look for moments when characters must choose between preserving themselves or their ideals. Doing so will help you think about the Essential Question:
How does literature shape or reflect society?

Literary Analysis

Plot is the sequence of events that happen in a story. Plots follow a series of phases that, taken together, are called the "dramatic arc." Plot is always driven by a **conflict**, or struggle, between opposing forces:

- **Rising Action:** The conflict is introduced and begins to build.
- **Climax:** The conflict reaches its moment of greatest intensity. This is the turning point, when an event signals the final outcome.
- **Falling Action:** The conflict diminishes and approaches resolution.
- **Resolution:** The conflict ends.

In a long, complex narrative such as this play, there may be multiple conflicts. In this play, Miller uses **dramatic exposition**, or prose commentaries, to provide background information about the characters and their world.

Reading Strategy

Most plays are written to be performed, not read. When reading drama, it is important to **identify the text structures** that provide different kinds of information. Text structures include *dialogue*, the words spoken by the actors, and *stage directions*, details the playwright includes about the setting and action. Stage directions may be set in italic type or in brackets to distinguish them from dialogue. As you read Act I of *The Crucible*, use a chart like the one shown to examine how information from the two types of text structures contributes to your understanding of the characters.

Vocabulary

predilection (prēd' ə lek' shən)
n. preexisting preference (p. 1127)

ingratiating (in grā' shē āt' in)
adj. charming; flattering (p. 1128)

dissembling (di sem' blin)
n. concealment of one's real nature or motives (p. 1130)

calumny (kal' əm nē)
n. false accusation; slander (p. 1138)

inculcation (in' kul kā' shən)
n. teaching by repetition and urging (p. 1146)

propitiation (prə pish' ē ā' shən)
n. action designed to soothe (p. 1148)

evade (ē vād')
v. to avoid or escape by deceit or cleverness (p. 1152)

Text Structure:
Dialogue

Character

Text Structure:
Stage Directions

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