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THE SOCIAL MESSAGE OF ARTHUR MILLER

as

FOUND IN HIS PLAY THE CRUCIBLE

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Today's society produces never ending pressures on the individual. A certain amount of conformity is necessary to maintain a workable society but it is the unnecessary conformity that looms as the individual's greatest danger. There are disturbing trends and elements in present day society and individual man is finding it increasingly difficult to establish an identity of his own.

Arthur Miller was aware of the disturbing elements in our country in the early 1950's, and he had a message he wanted to convey to the people. He conveyed this message through a form he was most familiar with, the literary form. In his play, The Crucible, he went back to an early period of our history, the Salem witchcraft era, to show a social tragedy in its causes and effects. The witchcraft trials were real. Miller wanted to avoid a similar reality from occurring again in our country, he wanted to open the peoples' eyes, he wanted to make people think.

A key factor in Salem of 1692 was the prevailing belief in witchcraft. Certain doctrines in his religion made the Massachusetts Puritan especially sensitive to devils and witches. The crime of witchcraft consisted in entering into a contract with the Devil, to barter one's soul in order to acquire unnatural arts and powers. This might be kept secret; it might on occasion be overt. The Puritans felt that sometimes God punished a whole nation for the sins of its most wicked citizens. Within the context of a community conditioned by such beliefs, a group of young, attention hungry, thoughtless

girls were able to initiate and continuously inflame a witchcraft hysteria in Salem which has placed that village on one of the darkest pages of American history. It was a shocking episode which demonstrated all too well just what depths otherwise intelligent people may descend to when irrational behavior gains the sanction of group approval.

Miller saw a similar tragedy, known as the McCarthy Era, developing in our society in the 1950's. The issue in the United States in the early 1950's was the peoples' fear of Communistic infiltration into our government. Within the context of a country influenced by such fears, a perceptive, attention-seeking Senator, named Joseph McCarthy, was able to capitalize on the common fear of Communist infiltration and bring it to such a point of hysteria in the United States that the early 1950's must also be listed as one of the darkest periods in American history. McCarthy accused and denounced, without having the proof to substantiate his charge, this or that citizen of being, or having been, a Communist. McCarthy was believed by many, and most of those who did not believe in him were afraid to speak out against him. The result was the ruining of decent peoples' reputations, the loss of their jobs, and the damage to their goals in life. The two periods in history, the Salem of 1692 and the McCarthy Era of 1953, were shockingly similar in many ways.

Miller having lived through the McCarthy Era, and having written about the Salem Era, felt his play, The Crucible, might convey some messages of social importance. There was

the hope that the play might give society the jolt it needed to look at itself realistically and to prevent a Salem tragedy from occurring again.

Miller's play is as valid today as when it was first presented in January of 1953. Society today still has its disturbing elements--the unnecessary conformity; the people who think intelligently as individuals, but who think irrationally and illogically when part of a group; the pressures society places on the individual, where only the strong and principled can survive. The Crucible's perennial message is to awaken people, and their social conscience, to the world around them--that they may see it always in its human values.