

In 1953, Arthur Miller's play "The Crucible" ran on Broadway at the Martin Beck. [It became] box office success and acclaimed by critics and audiences alike...

The events of the play are based on the events that took place in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. Many of the accusations of witchcraft in the play are driven by the affair between farmer, husband, and father John Proctor and the Minister's teenage niece Abigail Williams. In real life, Williams was probably about eleven at the time of the accusations and Proctor was over sixty, which makes it most unlikely that there was ever any such relationship. Miller himself said, "The play is not reportage of any kind ....what I was doing was writing a fictional story about an important theme."

The "important theme" that Miller was writing about was clear to many observers in 1953 at the play's opening. It was written in response to Senator McCarthy and the crusade the **House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)** was running against suspected communist sympathizers. Most critics felt that "The Crucible" was "a self contained play about a terrible period in American history."

ARTHUR MILLER'S *THE CRUCIBLE*:  
FACT & FICTION

(OR PICKY, PICKY, PICKY...) BY MARGO BURNS

Because I've been working with the materials of the Salem Witch Trails of 1692 for so long as an **academic historian**, many people have asked me if I've seen the play or film *The Crucible*, and what I think of it. Miller created works of art, **inspired** by the actual events for the artistic/political purposes Miller intended: first produced on Broadway on January 22, 1953, it was in response to the panic caused by irrational fear of Communism during the Cold War which resulted in the hearings by the House Committee on Unamerican Activities. \* In Miller's tales (there are slight differences, which I won't bother to get into unless it's a major difference), a lovelorn teenager is spurned by the married man she loves, and in her revenge, she fans a whole community into a blood-lust frenzy. This is simply not history. The real story is far more complex, dramatic, and interesting -- and well worth exploring. This page, however, is only dedicated to separating the fact from the fiction in Miller's work.

People condemned as witches in New England were not burned, but hanged, and in the aftermath of the events in Salem, it was generally agreed that none of them had actually been witches at all. Some modern versions cast

the story as something that has to do with intolerance of difference, that the accused were really just oddballs that the community tacitly approved getting rid of, but most of the people who were accused, convicted and executed in Salem were remarkable by their very adherence to community norms. In the 1970s, a theory was put forth that the afflicted had suffered from hallucinations from eating moldy rye wheat -- ergotism -- and although that theory has generally been refuted, its life continues in the popular explanation of the events. (A recent biological theory which also fails to hold up under the scrutiny of medical and Salem scholars alike, however, is that the afflicted suffered from *encephalitis lethargica*.) Lastly, Rev. Parris' slave woman, Tituba, is usually assumed to have been of Black African descent, but recent research indicates she was Amerindian, probably South American Arawak, always being referred to in the documents of the period as "an Indian woman." Had she been African or Black, she would have been so described.

Here's my list of historical inaccuracies in the play/screenplay:

- Abigail Williams is often called Rev. Parris' "niece" but in fact there is no genealogical evidence to prove their familial relationship. She is sometimes in the original texts referred to as his "kinfolk" however.
- Miller admits in the introduction to the play that he boosted Abigail Williams' age to 17 even though the real girl was only 11, but he never mentions that John Proctor was 60 and Elizabeth, 41, was his third wife. Proctor was not a farmer but a tavern keeper. Elizabeth Proctor was indeed pregnant, during the trial, and did have a temporary stay of execution after convicted, which ultimately spared her life because it extended past the end of the period that the executions were taking place.
- The first two girls to become afflicted were Betty Parris and Abigail Williams, not Ann Putnam, and they had violent, physical fits, not a sleep that they could not wake from.
- There never was any wild dancing rite in the woods led by Tituba, and certainly Rev. Parris never stumbled upon them. Tituba and her husband, John Indian (absent in Miller's telling), were asked by a neighbor, Mary Sibley, to bake a special "witch cake," -- made of rye and the girls' urine, fed to a dog -- European white magic to ascertain who the witch was who was afflicting the girls.
- Ruth was not the only Putnam child out of eight to survive infancy. In 1692, the Putnams had six living children, Ruth being the eldest, down to 1-year-old Timothy. Ann Putnam was pregnant during most of 1692. Ann and her sister, however did lose a fair number of infants, though certainly not all.

- The events portrayed here were the examinations of the accused in Salem Village from March to April in the context of a special court of "Oyer and Terminer." These were not the actual trials, per se, which began later, in June 1692. The procedure was basically this: someone would bring a complaint to the authorities, and the authorities would decide if there was enough reason to send the sheriff or other law enforcement officer to arrest them. While this was happening, depositions -- statements people made on paper outside of court -- were taken and evidence gathered, typically against the accused. After evidence or charges were presented, and depositions sworn to before the court, the grand jury would decide whether to indict the person, and if so, on what charges. If indicted, the person's case would then go to a petit jury, or to "trial" something like we know it only much faster, to decide guilt or innocence. Guilt in a case of witchcraft in 1692 came with an automatic sentence of death by hanging, as per English law.
- Rebecca Nurse was hanged on July 19, John Proctor on August 19, and Martha Corey on September 22. The only person executed who recited the Lord's Prayer on the gallows was Rev. George Burroughs -- which caused quite a stir since it was generally believed at the time that a witch could not say the Lord's Prayer without making a mistake. They also would not have been hanged while praying, since the condemned were always allowed their last words and prayers.
- Reverend Hale would not have signed any "death warrants," as he claims to have signed 17 in the play. That was not for the clergy to do.
- The elderly George Jacobs was not accused of sending his spirit in through the window to lie on the Putnam's daughter -- in fact, it was usually quite the opposite case: women such as Bridget Bishop were accused of sending their spirits into men's bedrooms to lie on them. In that period, women were perceived as the lusty, sexual creatures whose allure men must guard against!

- The hysteria did not die out "as more and more people refused to save themselves by giving false confessions," as the epilogue of the movie states. The opposite was true: more and more people gave false confessions to save themselves as it became apparent that confession could save one from the noose. Public opinion of the trials did take a turn. There were over two hundred people in prison when the general reprieve was given, but they were not released until they paid their prison fees. Neither did the tide turn when Abigail Williams accused Rev. Hale's wife, as the play claims -- although the "afflicted" did start accusing a lot more people far and wide to the point of absurdity, including various people around in other Massachusetts towns whom they had never laid eyes on.
- Giles Corey was not executed for refusing to name a witness, as portrayed in the movie. The play is accurate: he was accused of witchcraft, and refused to enter a plea, which held up the proceedings, since the law of the time required that the accused enter a plea. He was pressed to death with stones, but the method was used to try to force him to enter a plea so that his trial could proceed. Corey probably realized that if he was tried at all, he would be executed, and his children would be disinherited.
- There's a tiny scene in the movie with a goat getting into someone's garden and tempers flaring -- the actual history is that three years before the witchcraft accusations, a neighbor's pigs got into the Nurse family's fields, and Rebecca Nurse flew off the handle yelling at him about it. Soon thereafter, the neighbor had an apparent stroke and died within a few months. This was seen as evidence in 1692 of Rebecca Nurse's witchcraft.

## Reasons for the hysteria

There are various theories as to why the community of Salem Village exploded into delusions of witchcraft and demonic interference. The most common one is that the Puritans, who governed Massachusetts Bay Colony with little royal intervention from its settlement in 1630 until the new Charter was installed in 1692, went through mass religion-induced hysterical delusion. Most modern experts view that as too simplistic an explanation. Other theories include child abuse, fortune-telling experiments gone amok, ergot-related paranoid fantasies (ergot is a fungus that grows on damp barley, producing a substance very similar to D-lysergic acid; in a pre-industrial society, it is easy to accidentally ingest it), conspiracy by the Putnam family to destroy the rival Porter family, and societal victimization of women.

There was also great stress within the Puritan community. They had lost their charter in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and in the spring of 1692 still did not know what their future would be. They were under constant Indian attack and could not depend on England at all for support; their militia came from the ranks of their young men, and in 1675's King Philip's War their entire population had been decimated: one of ten European settlers in New England was killed by Indian attacks. Though that war was over, Indian raids and skirmishes were a constant hazard. More and more, New England was becoming a mercantile colony, and Puritans and non-Puritans alike were making a lot of money, which the Puritans saw as both necessary and sinful. And as the merchant class rose in status, the ministerial class declined.

Perhaps the most compelling new theory is that of Mary Beth Norton, who argued in her book *In The Devil's Snare* that any or all of the above explanations likely played an important role, but Salem and the rest of New England, and particularly the north and northwest areas, were besieged by frequent Indian attacks, which created an atmosphere of fear that contributed greatly to the hysteria. Her evidence: Most of the accused witches and most of the afflicted girls had strong societal or personal ties to Indian attacks over the preceding 15 years. The accusers frequently referenced a "black man," discussed joint meetings between the alleged witches and Indians in sabbats, and described images of torture taken directly from tales of Indian captivity. In addition, Puritan clergy had, since King Philip's War in 1675, frequently referred to Indians as being of the devil, had associated them with witchcraft and, in pulpit-pounding sermons that lasted as long as five hours, expounded repeatedly about Satan and his devils besieging the Puritans, who were seen as the army of God. In short, to the New England Puritan mind, concerted Indian attacks were the Devil trying to bring down the Puritan society, and attacks should be expected from within as well as without. By 1691, Puritans were primed for witchcraft hysteria.

Salem Village itself was a microcosm of Puritan stress. Half of those in the Village were farmers and supported the minister, Samuel Parris, in breaking away from Salem Town to form their own distinct township; the other half wanted to remain part of Salem Town, retaining the merchant ties, and refused to contribute to the maintenance of Parris and his family. In addition, a number of refugees from recent Indian attacks in the Maine and New Hampshire regions had taken shelter with relatives in Salem, bringing tales of horror with them. As a result, by 1691 Salem Village was a powder keg, and the spreading possession of young girls was the spark that set it off.

One major factor that contributed to the witchcraft hysteria in 1692 that cannot be overlooked was the fear generated by strongly held Puritan beliefs that Satan and his demons were in the physical world, causing a multitude of problems while enticing ordinary human beings to assist the unholy armies of darkness by becoming witches and warlocks. Everything from Indian attacks to spoiled milk was thought to be the work of Satan and his malevolent allies, both supernatural and human. These beliefs were as real to the Puritans of Salem Village as the rocky soil of New England beneath their feet.

Vestiges of the Puritan fear of the unseen world can still be seen in New England. In many public libraries, serious historical works on the Salem Witchcraft Trials, like *In The Devil's Snare* by Mary Beth Norton, are generally found next to books on ghosts, alien abduction, and books on the occult.

<http://www.bostoncitylinks.com/salem.html>