

Arthur Miller and the House Un-American Activities Committee Lesson Plan

Introduction

Set during the Salem witch trials of 1692, the themes articulated throughout *The Crucible* held particular relevance for American audiences of the 1950s. Living during the Second Red Scare and the reign of the House Un-American Activities Committee, Arthur Miller felt there were strong parallels between the events of 1692 and the Communist panic of his day. In a 1996 retrospective, Miller poignantly recalled,

“One problem remained unyielding [when writing the play]: so many practices of the Salem trials were similar to those employed by the congressional committees that I could easily be accused of skewing history for a mere partisan purpose. The more I read into the Salem panic, the more it touched off corresponding images of common experiences in the fifties: the old friend of a blacklisted person crossing the street to avoid being seen talking to him; the overnight conversions of former leftists into born-again patriots; and so on. Apparently, certain processes are universal.”

In 1956, Miller applied for a routine renewal of his passport and the House Un-American Activities Committee used this as an opportunity to subpoena him to appear before the committee.

Objectives:

- Deepen students understanding of *The Crucible*'s the major themes.
- Enhance students' understanding of how the Second Red Scare impacted American citizens.
- Encourage students to draw parallels between historic acts of scapegoating and modern behavior.

Materials:

- PBS excerpt from Arthur Miller's testimony given before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/excerpts-from-arthur-millers-testimony-before-the-house-un-american-activities-committee/14006/>
- HUAC worksheet
- Salem Witch Museum's Witch-Hunt Wall online database: <https://salemwitchmuseum.com/witch-hunt/>. This resource is an online extension of the museum's exhibit *Witches: Evolving Perceptions*. Museum visitors are presented with three events from 20th century American history (including the Communist blacklists created by the House Un-American Activities Committee) along with a formula “Fear + a Trigger = a Scapegoat” that can be applied to each example. As visitors exit the exhibit, they are given a postcard with a blank formula and have the opportunity to submit their own example to the museum's online database. The museum has received over a thousand submissions to date and posts every received response, with the exception of those that include vulgarity, hate speech, or are unintelligible. These submissions can be seen on this website from month-to-month, going back to 2017, along with a selection of current events that were reported by major news outlets during that month.

Warmup:

- Read aloud the above quote from Arthur Miller.
- Ask students for predictions regarding Arthur Miller's experience with the House Un-American Activities Committee. These predictions can be listed on the whiteboard/smartboard or written down by each student.

Activity Part I:

- Assign students to read the roles of Richard Arens, Arthur Miller, Donald Jackson, and Francis Eugene Walter.
- Either in small groups or as a class, have students read aloud their corresponding section of the transcript.
- After the transcript has been read, have students complete the HUAC worksheet.
- When the worksheets have been completed, ask the class to come back together to have a group discussion about each question.

Activity Part II:

- Write out the formula “Fear + a Trigger = a Scapegoat” on the front whiteboard/smartboard.
- Ask students if/how the actions of the House Un-American Activities Committee align with this formula. What was the fear? What was the trigger? Who were the scapegoated?
- Either in-class, or for homework, have students visit the Salem Witch Museum’s Witch-Hunt Wall Online database.
- Ask students to review the examples posted over the span of several months and the events listed for those months.
- Have students write a one-page reflection including the following:
 - What were the major scapegoats listed during the months you viewed?
 - Do you agree all or most of these examples follow the witch-hunt formula? Why or why not?
 - Do you think there was a connection between the current events listed that month and the scapegoats submitted by visitors?
 - What event, either from history or the modern day, would you submit to this database? Explain how you believe this event is an example of scapegoating.

