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“The Crucible” Essay - Rough Draft

It was a dark and sinister time for the United States during the Cold War in the 1950s. Terror and distress thrived in society, as well as frustration and envy that caused people to engage in conflict with each other. These trends were caused by the worry that Communists would infiltrate the United States. The fear millions of people had towards this provoked an anti-Communism crusade known as the Red Scare to arise and sweep the nation as multiple people turned against each other in fright. Many were charged of being Communists, such as playwright Arthur Miller. Angered by this, Miller decided to create a play that would show that the Red Scare happened to be a great folly and inform the terrified American people that the government was misinforming them. And he did so by writing, “The Crucible,” a play based on the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. In the play, all these characteristics of the Red Scare take place in the play, which makes the audience receive Miller’s lesson. Arthur Miller reveals through his play, “The Crucible,” that mass hysteria and fear can destroy and tear apart a community, which is conveyed through parallels such as the struggle to maintain one’s identity, the abuse of power, and false claims.

Throughout the play, the concept of saving one’s name is constantly mentioned to be compared to what is happening in the 1950s Red Scare. In the setting of the play, the Puritans believe that they had to live perfect and sinless lives in order to be with God, and so they became

preoccupied with keeping their identities, just like how many ordinary civilians in the 1950s tried to keep their name. An example of this is shown through John Proctor as he struggles to maintain his identity. Proctor exclaims in Act Four, "Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on my feet of them that hang. How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!" (Miller 43). In this quote, Proctor explains why his confession must not be nailed on the church for the village to see, arguing that his name cannot be taken away from him. This shows his struggle to maintain his identity, because he is desperately trying to reason with Danforth about keeping the confession so that the public does not know the sin he committed, and this will maintain the reputation he currently has. Meanwhile, in the real world, many victims were found guilty of being Communist spies such as Owen Lattimore. Lattimore was the United States government liaison to Chiang Kai-Shek, and was very outspoken and had multiple liberal beliefs, which made him vulnerable to McCarthy's anti-Communist campaign. After being accused, he was charged with 7 counts of perjury. Like stated on the article, "The Strange Ordeal of Owen Lattimore," written by the Washington Post, Lattimore struggled with keeping his superb reputation but could not do much to save it. Lattimore reveals, "Until a decision is reached, my life as a teacher, a writer, a lecturer, and in many instances a friend is at a standstill, and my seriously damaged reputation cannot only not be repaired, but will continue to deteriorate." He is stating this since he knows that he should end his struggle because he is aware of the fact that he can never go back to the life he lived after the charges he faced against him. Even after his death, many people continued to question his loyalty to the United States. These two ideas show the destruction that tore apart a community, for it led to hysteria that caused

people to follow the leader or the most powerful person in their environment, since they were afraid of having the same fate as others, which was to lose their reputation. As shown, the struggle to maintain one's identity is a parallel that occurs in "The Crucible" and in real life in the 1950s. And this concept is one of the many that explain Arthur Miller's lesson.

The abuse of power is shown in "The Crucible" and in the 1950s during the Red Scare, which supports the lesson Arthur Miller reveals. Most of the authority during this time had a vast amount of power and so instead of using this power correctly, they used it against their rivals or people that worked against the accusers. In other words, the powerful people abused their power and worked against those who were accused. An example of someone who abuses their power in "The Crucible" is Judge Danforth. Judge Danforth is seen abusing his power in Act Four, where he insists, "Now hear me, and beguile yourselves no more. I will not receive a single plea for postponement. Twelve are already executed; the names of these seven are already given out, and the village expects to see them die this morning. Them that will not confess will hang.

Postponement now speaks a floundering on my part; reprieve or pardon must cast doubt upon the guilt of them that died till now."(Miller 39). In other words, Danforth claims he will not postpone the hangings, since his reputation is at risk and that if he were to postpone the hangings, the town of Salem would resent him and his name would look bad, which may lead him to lose his job. This is an example of abuse of power, because Judge Danforth is not using the authority he has to save various lives, and instead is misusing the power he has to save his own name. Something similar to this example happens in the Red Scare. During the 1950s, John Edgar Hoover, or J. Edgar Hoover as he is known as, was the director of the FBI after its creation and up to his death, so he had a great amount of power in his hands. As the Cold War began, his

stance on anti-Communism intensified, which led him to create an investigation group known as the Counter Intelligence Program, or COINTELPRO, to work against the enemies of the countries. At that time, the enemies were the Communists, so the group took action to work against them. For instance, an article based on J. Edgar Hoover written on Biography.com explains, “The group conducted a series of covert, and oftentimes illegal, investigations designed to discredit or disrupt radical political organizations. Initially, Hoover ordered background checks on government employees to prevent foreign agents from infiltrating the government.” That is to say that Hoover ordered the group to investigate all government employees to discover who is a Communist. The actions he took were beyond his limits, meaning that he abused his power to operate against Communism. As shown in “The Crucible” and in the 1950s Red Scare, those who had a vast amount of power to benefit the country chose to abuse it, and that caused society to be torn apart by the fear and propaganda the leaders had set up. Moreover, the occurrence of these two events create a parallel that teaches Arthur Miller’s moral. Yet, Miller portrays his moral through additional parallels in “The Crucible.”

The concept of false claims are constantly brought up throughout “The Crucible,” as they were constantly mentioned in the 1950s Red Scare. Arthur Miller incorporates this idea that is relevant to his time into his play by showing that the accused would immediately face charges, with or without evidence. Meaning that the accusers can just blame someone for their troubles and that accused person would immediately be punished. This type of situation is seen in “The Crucible” in Act Two, where Cheever explains, “The girl, the Williams girl, Abigail Williams, sir. She sat to dinner in Reverend Parris’s house tonight, and without word nor warnin’ she falls to the floor. Like a struck beast, he says, and screamed a scream that a bull would weep to hear.

And he goes to save her, and, stuck two inches into the flesh of her belly, he draw a needle out. And demandin' of how she come to be stabbed, she-*to Proctor now*- testify it were you wife's familiar spirit pushed it in."(Miller 23). To put it differently, Cheever states that the main antagonist of the play, Abigail, exclaimed she had a needle stuck into her stomach earlier that day by Elizabeth Proctor, who Abigail claimed did so by pinning a needle to a poppet, which is why he is there to arrest Elizabeth. What Abigail confessed is an example of a false claim in the play, since it is know that what she confessed was not true. As noted, most claims were taken very seriously in the play even if they were just lies, just as it was during the Red Scare.

Concurrent to when Arthur Miller had been writing "The Crucible," Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin made a public announcement that he had a list of 205 Communist spies working in the United States. An article titled, "McCarthy says communists are in State Department," published by History.com writes, "Speaking before the Ohio County Women's Republican Club in Wheeling, West Virginia, Senator McCarthy waved before his audience a piece of paper. According to the only published newspaper account of the speech, McCarthy said that, 'I have here in my hand a list of 205 [State Department employees] that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department.' "What this quote means is that McCarthy had just made random false claims against those working in the State Department, and had no evidence to back up his claims, whatsoever. Furthermore, although he did not have evidence to prove his claims, the authority continued to believe his statements and chose to place charges against the accused, just like what happened in Arthur Miller's play. These concepts caused fear to control one another so that people could save themselves from the wrath of punishment, and so it

resulted in making false claims against one another. Ultimately, the false claims in “The Crucible” and during McCarthyism create a parallel that just about proves Arthur Miller’s lesson.

As has been noted, Arthur Miller’s main idea or concept is shown in his play through the struggle to keep one’s identity or reputation, the abuse of power, and false claims. All three of these ideas were characteristics of the Red Scare in the 1950s that had led to terror and disruption, and revealed that mass hysteria and fear can cause disruption and tear apart a community. These ideas are significant, for they played a major role in history such as during the Red Scare and during the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, which were both events that took place in the United States. Moreover, this concept relates to us, since all these characteristics- lies, bigotry, deceit, etc.- continue to occur in society today. Which is why people should know about this type of situation and should be aware that fear leads to worse events and hysteria.

Fortunately, it can be concluded that Americans have learned their lesson about what suspicion and panic can cause, since the United States has not been the disastrous and chaotic country it once was during the nationwide known Red Scare.

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