

TSSMTM
Creating VCE Success

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
PAIRED COMPARISONS

**The Crucible / Year of Wonders: A
Novel of the Plague**

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Contents

HISTORICAL CONTEXT.....	7
GENRE.....	8
STRUCTURE.....	8
STYLE.....	8
SETTING.....	8
PLOT SUMMARY.....	8
CHARACTER PROFILES.....	8
Major and Minor Characters.....	8
THEMES AND ISSUES.....	8
Puritanism.....	8
McCarthyism.....	8
Conflict within the Community.....	8
Conflict within the Individual.....	8
Conflict in Relationships.....	8
IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS & PASSAGES.....	8
AUTHOR NOTES.....	8
HISTORICAL CONTEXT.....	8
GENRE.....	8
Audience.....	8
STRUCTURE.....	8
STYLE.....	8
Orientation.....	8
Report Writing Style.....	8
Melodrama.....	8
Pathos.....	8
States of Mind.....	8
Symbols.....	8
<i>Nature</i>	8
SETTINGS.....	8
CHAPTER SUMMARIES.....	8
CHARACTER PROFILES.....	8
Protagonists and Antagonists.....	8
Major Characters.....	8
Minor Characters.....	8
Relationships Between Characters.....	8
THEMES AND ISSUES.....	8
Fear and Distrust.....	8
Death and Mortality.....	8
Love and Pathos.....	8
Reason versus Superstition.....	8
Secrets and Deceit.....	8
Faith.....	8
Hope versus despair.....	8
IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS.....	8
COMPARATIVE TEXT ANALYSIS.....	8
Overview of Assessment Requirements.....	8

ENGLISH VCAA Recommended Performance Descriptors (not compulsory to use) 8
Contribution to Final Assessment 8
COMPARATIVE TEXT METHOD 8
The Task 8
Approaching the Task 8
Three Methods for Writing a Comparative Essay 8
Historical Context (Setting) 8
Superstition and Religious Hypocrisy (Theme) 8
Relationships (Character Development) 8
Greed and Justice (Theme) 8
Transcendence (Theme) 8
Language/Metalanguage 8
SAMPLE ESSAY TOPICS 8
FINAL EXAMINATION TIPS 8
REFERENCES 8

SAMPLE

SAMPLE

TEXT 1

The Crucible

Author Notes

Arthur Asher Miller (October 17, 1915 – February 10, 2005) was an American playwright, essayist, and prominent figure in twentieth-century American theatre. His most popular plays were “All My Sons” (1947), “Death of a Salesman” (1949), “The Crucible” (1953) and “A View from a Bridge” (1955). He also wrote several screenplays and was noted for his work on “The Misfits” (1961). “Death of a Salesman” is often named in the list of America’s greatest plays.

Miller was a high profile public figure, especially during the late 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee and was married to Marilyn Monroe. In 1980 he received the St. Louis Literary Award from the St Louis University Library Associates. He received the Praemium Imperiale in 2002 and the Jerusalem prize in 2003.

SAMPLE

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The play was written at the height of McCarthyism: the hunt for alleged Communists by Senator Joe McCarthy. This was done by appearances before the House Un-American Activities Committee. When Miller applied in 1956 for a routine renewal of his passport the Committee used the opportunity to subpoena him to appear. Before doing so, Miller asked the committee not to ask him to name names, to which the chairman, Francis E. Walter, agreed.



While newsmen take notes, Chairman Dies of House Committee Investigating Un-American Activities reads and proofs his letter replying to Pres. Roosevelt's attack on the Committee, Oct. 26, 1938

When Miller attended the hearing, to which Monroe accompanied him, risking her own career, he gave the committee a detailed account of his political activities. Reneging on the chairman's promise, the committee demanded the names of friends and colleagues who had participated in similar activities. Miller refused to comply, saying "I could not use the name of another person and bring trouble on him." As a result, a judge found Miller guilty of contempt of Congress. Miller was sentenced to a fine and a prison sentence, blacklisted, and disallowed a US passport. In 1958, his conviction was overturned by the court of appeals, which ruled that Miller had been misled by the chairman of the HUAC.

Miller's experience with the HUAC affected him throughout his life. In the late 1970s, he became very interested in the highly publicized Barbara Gibbons murder case, in which Gibbons' son, Peter Reilly, was convicted of his mother's murder based on what many felt was a coerced confession and little other evidence. Two television stations produced episodes about the murder, postulating that part of the reason Miller took such an active interest (including supporting Reilly's defence and using his own celebrity to bring attention to Reilly's plight) was because he had felt similarly persecuted in his run-ins with the HUAC. He sympathised with Reilly, whom he firmly believed to be innocent and to have been railroaded by the Connecticut State Police and the Attorney General who had initially prosecuted the case.

GENRE

The *Crucible* is a tragic historical drama that employs allegory. Miller said the play is taken from history. He said: "No character is in the play who did not take a similar role in Salem, 1692." Miller did take some liberties, however. He changed Abigail's age to 17 years old instead of 11 years old and imagined a doomed romance between her and John Proctor.

Rarely has a play had a more pointed contemporary parallel. A play about a witch hunt, it is pointed at the 'witch hunt' that was the McCarthyism of the era, when, in the frenzy to discover communists, investigators offered witnesses the same kind of impossible choices that faced the alleged witches in Salem. Agree to the charges and you will be condemned. Deny them and refuse to co-operate and you will be condemned. This forms the basis of the tragedy in the play, setting the conditions for John Proctor to choose integrity over life.

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