It is important to understand the historical context of the play \textit{The Crucible}. The 16th and 17th centuries were a time when belief in witchcraft was strong. Spells, potions, hexes and all things connected with the dark arts were at the core of many people's fears. Even King James I of England was a firm believer in witches and witchcraft and the harm that they could do. So it is understandable that the pilgrims who left England and settled in New England, America, brought with them their fears and prejudices, especially those relating to witchcraft. The people at the time were extremely superstitious, and often could not explain certain events rationally or scientifically, which only served to heighten their fears. Witches and witchcraft were blamed for any unknown phenomena. It is also interesting to note that the dark arts were primarily seen as a woman's domain and it was the woman who was considered more likely to be possessed by the devil; thus her propensity to fall to evil ways. Deeply religious people such as Puritans were especially prone to see the devil's hand being involved in all that was unpleasant or inexplicable; from convulsions, stomach cramps, not being able to concentrate, to crops failing or stock falling sick. The New World must have been a frightening place for the Puritans at the time, full of dangers of the unknown. It is not surprising that what took place in Salem in the 1600s developed into a mass hysteria.

The story of \textit{The Crucible} is based on real events that took place in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. In January of that year, a group of teenage girls seemed to be afflicted by a mysterious illness. The girls exhibited strange behaviour such as: blasphemous screaming, convulsions, seizures and trance-like states. The sickness was blamed on witchcraft and an official investigation was put into action. By April over 300 people had been accused of witchcraft and were imprisoned. In June 1692, the death penalty was introduced as a punishment for witchcraft. The first person to be hanged was a woman named Bridget Bishop, who maintained her innocence to the end. Following her death, accusations of witchcraft escalated, but the trials were not unopposed. Several townspeople signed petitions on behalf of the accused people they believed to be innocent. A number of women were hanged including Rebecca Nurse and Sarah Good.

A man called John Proctor was deeply concerned at the way torture was being used to make people confess. He wrote to the Minister of Boston asking for an investigation but was ignored. Proctor's efforts proved to be futile for in August he was hanged along with four other people, on Gallows Hill. His wife Elizabeth was reprieved because she was pregnant. Another old man by the name of Giles Corey was not hanged but pressed under heavy stones until he died. Corey refused to stand trial and the penalty for not cooperating was 'peine forte et dure' better known as...
'pressing'. Corey knew that once he was accused of being in contempt of court, his property would have to be given to his sons instead of the State. Three days after Corey's death on 22 September 1692, eight more people were convicted of being witches, including his wife Martha. Eventually Governor Phips ordered that the reliance on 'spectral' and 'intangible evidence' should no longer be allowed in the trials. In October the 'court of oyer and terminer' was finally dissolved. Later the government acknowledged that the convictions and the executions had been a mistake. In a number of the cases, the accusing families gained property for the convictions of the accused witches. It was a horrible time in the period of American history.

The play The Crucible is often referred to as historical fiction. Arthur Miller had always been interested in history and he decided to go to the source of the Salem witch hunts. Miller visited Salem and read the recorded transcripts of what transpired in the court house. He had an idea for a play but did not want to simply write a historical drama. McCarthyism (the pursuit of communists or communist sympathisers by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the HUAC) created a frenzied attack in 1950s America on many well known writers, actors, artists, directors and so on. People were accused, others were implicated and some people, in order to save themselves, accused innocent men and women of collaborating with other communists.

Arthur Miller saw an opportunity to connect the past with the present and to write about an issue which he felt was important. Miller wrote:

One day, after several hours of reading at the Historical Society I got up to leave and that was when I noticed hanging on the wall several framed etchings of the witchcraft trials, apparently made by an artist who must have witnessed them...suddenly it became my memory of the dancing men in the synagogue... I knew instantly what the connection was...

Miller goes on to explain his own association in terms of religion and moral intensity. The Salem witch hunts of the 1600s highlighted an era when people were controlled by their fear, and because of that fear many innocent people were falsely accused of conspiring to act in accordance with the devil. Ironically the witch hunts mirrored the events that were taking place in America during Miller's time.

Miller spent much time reading over the testimonies of the people participating in the witch hunts. The characters are real people named in the documentation of the trials; however, he did change small details. Most of the characters in The Crucible, including John and Elizabeth Proctor, Judge Danforth and Abigail Williams really did exist. Miller used his artistic pen to fictionalise the characters; he saw the possibility of creating a story which could transpose itself in any time and any place in the world. Miller became attached to his characters and the real people they represented. He wrote the following while standing on the rock at Gallows Hill:

Here hung Rebecca, John Proctor, George Jacobs, people more real to me than the living can ever be. The sense of a terrible marvel again that people could have such a belief in themselves and in the rightness of their consciences as to give their lives rather than say what they thought was false...Rebecca said, as it is written in the record, 7 cannot belie myself. ‘And she knew it would kill her...’

In The Crucible, John Proctor, a young farmer in his thirties, has an affair with Abigail Williams, a young woman of about eighteen. In the Salem Witch Hunt documentation the real John Proctor was an elderly tavern keeper and Abigail was only eleven years old, so there is no historical evidence to suggest that these two did actually have an affair. Miller's dramatic licence allowed him to recreate and rewrite some of the ages and the relationships in the play. Miller openly admitted that he took certain liberties in the process of the play's creation. The characters were
developed from Miller’s research using letters, trial records and reports from the time, and their fates were based on historical facts.

It is also interesting to note that while Arthur Miller was writing this play, many of the events in America at the time were a microcosm of a larger fear looming. After the Second World War, the alliance between the United States and the then USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) became more and more tenuous as the two countries became increasingly suspicious of each other. The 1950s was a time of extreme fear in America. The Americans despised the ideology of communism and feared it spreading into their country. America is a democracy; a country which believes in capitalism, free trade and people making money. The Soviet Union was a communist country - they despised free trade and people making money for themselves; they believed that people should be loyal to the state and the leader. This stand-off became known as the Cold War.

The United States and the USSR never openly engaged in war but the USSR was often treated with contempt and blocked from certain diplomatic agreements and proposals. The US government began to worry about the spread and infiltration of communism and Senator McCarthy was given the task of chairing the House Un-American Activities Committee. The committee’s job was to find possible communists and communist sympathisers and to bring them to trial before the HUAC. They targeted people working in the media industry because they felt that this was where communist ideology could be easily spread among large numbers of Americans.

The McCarthy era dehumanised American communists, and they were represented as ideological outlaws who deserved whatever they got. The film director, Elias Kazan, a good friend of Arthur Miller, was questioned by the HUAC. Kazan was promised that he would not be prosecuted if he would name others who might be communist sympathisers. Many, like Kazan, were quick to point the finger at friends and associates in order to save their own careers and their own reputations. Ashamed at what he had done, Kazan then confided in Miller who used this experience as an impetus to write The Crucible. Arthur Miller himself was called to give evidence to the HUAC in 1957. Miller refused to testify and was convicted of contempt of court. The following year, however, the judgement was overturned.

The Crucible stands as a statement or warning of how easily and quickly society can and does accuse people. Smear campaigns are often based on groundless accusations and rooted in extreme fear or prejudice. In delivering this message Miller’s play crosses all boundaries of time, place, politics and religion.