



Confronting the Pressure to Conform Through *The Crucible*

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Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the ways in which *The Crucible* serves as an allegory that reveals the tension between unalienable rights and the social pressure to conform. To begin, students will watch a short video from a speech by Arthur Miller that will guide them to consider why he wrote *The Crucible*. Then students will engage in learning activities that will help them understand what contributes to the allegorical meaning of a play—particularly by identifying and explaining elements that enhance the allegorical meaning



of *The Crucible*. After reading act 4, students will examine the ways that relationships within the play serve as vehicles that enhance the audience's understanding of the conflict between individual rights and the pressure to conform to society's wishes. Finally, after writing journal entries from the perspective of a chosen character, students will determine whether or not *The Crucible* is relevant to our current moment.

Essential Questions

- How does Arthur Miller use the structure of Greek tragedy to illuminate the consequences of governmental systems that prioritize rigid social hierarchies over individual rights and equality?
- How does Miller's play serve as an allegory that reveals the conflict between the principle of unalienable rights and a community's demands for conformity?
- How do the characters' relationships illustrate the difference between the "consent of the governed" and pressure to conform?

Learning Objectives

- Analyze how *The Crucible* serves as an allegory that reveals the conflict between unalienable rights and a society's demands for conformity.
- Explore how the characters and relationships in *The Crucible* illuminated the tension between individual rights and societal pressures.
- Evaluate the role of the setting in *The Crucible* and how it influences character decisions and the narrative's themes.
- Analyze act 4 of *The Crucible* and explain its effect on character development and relationships.
- Identify and explain how figurative language in *The Crucible* enhances the allegorical meaning of the play.

Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- **LAN 7.B** Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and that may establish a line of reasoning.
- **CHA 1.D** Describe how textual details reveal nuances and complexities in characters' relationships with one another.
- **SET 2.B** Explain the function of setting in a narrative.
- **STR 3.C** Explain the function of structure in a text.
- **FIG 5.B** Explain the function of specific words and phrases in a text.

Materials

- Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#)
- "Arthur Miller Explains the Real Meaning of 'The Crucible'" video
- "What Is an Allegory?" video
- "What Is an Allegory?" transcript
- Photos of crucibles to project on a board
- "Uncovering Meaning in *The Crucible*" graphic organizer – 1 per student

Warm-Up

Show students the "Arthur Miller Explains the Real Meaning of 'The Crucible'" video. Then ask them to respond to the following reflection questions on a sheet of notebook paper.

- To what extent do you agree with Arthur Miller when he says, "Historians write about events that happen to other people. Writers write about things that happen to them." Explain your thoughts.
- What does Arthur Miller mean when he says writers "are, in a way, witnesses to history"? How does *The Crucible* reflect what Miller witnessed in his lifetime?

Debrief as a whole class about this video and these reflection questions. Then transition to the Lesson Activities by sharing with students that much of what Miller is talking about here has to do with *The Crucible* being an allegory. Explain that understanding this play as an allegory is crucial to understanding the meaning and intentions behind Miller's writing.

Lesson Activities

BEFORE READING

The purpose of this section is to set up students to be able to successfully understand the allegorical meaning of *The Crucible*. After learning about or reviewing the definition of an allegory, students will apply that definition to what they have read thus far. Then they will be prepared to apply that thinking to the final act of the play.

ALLEGORY AND *THE CRUCIBLE*

STEP 1

Have students watch the "What Is an Allegory?" video or read the "What Is an Allegory?" transcript from the Oregon State University School of Writing, Literature and Film. Even if students have a strong understanding of allegory, these resources will help them engage in the reading activities for act 4 of *The Crucible*. While students are watching, have them respond to the following questions:

- In your own words, what is the definition of an allegory?
- What is a “tenor” in an allegory?
- What is a “vehicle” in an allegory?
- Give an example of a tenor and a vehicle in an allegory and explain what constitutes the tenor and what constitutes the vehicle.

STEP 2

Facilitate a whole-group discussion about allegory, paying particular attention to the definitions of “tenor” and “vehicle.” Make sure students have a strong understanding that a tenor is a hidden meaning or idea, and the vehicle is the structure or frame that brings the meaning to light. Both the tenor and the vehicle work with each other to add depth and meaning to the allegory.

*Note: It will be important to tell students that there aren't necessarily just 1 tenor and 1 vehicle in a piece of writing. There are likely multiple tenors and multiple vehicles, and they are nested within the allegorical meaning. For instance, when thinking about *The Crucible*, we might think of the overarching allegory Miller made between the tragic story of the Salem witch trials and the political tragedy of McCarthyism he was witnessing in his own time. However, within this larger vehicle of tragedy, there are smaller vehicles that encapsulate the tenors (ideas) of democracy, conformity, and mass hysteria. When we look at *The Crucible* as an allegory, we can see these vehicles and tenors working together to add depth and meaning to the allegory as a whole.

STEP 3

Divide students into pairs or small groups. Ask them to discuss the following questions:

- What is *The Crucible* an allegory for?
- What is a tenor (or a hidden idea or meaning that is not explicitly stated) in *The Crucible*? What is the vehicle that Miller uses to share this tenor? How do the tenor and vehicle enrich your understanding of the allegorical meaning in *The Crucible*?

STEP 4

After all students have had a chance to discuss these questions, debrief as a whole class. Be sure to write students' responses to the 1st question on the board or a piece of butcher paper. Keep visible these ideas about what *The Crucible* is an allegory for so students can refer to them later.

*Note: Make sure that students understand the differences between the terms “allegory,” “tenor,” and “vehicle.” These terms will be necessary for engaging in activities that follow, so students need to be clear on their meanings.

CONNECT

Bring students back to the principles of the Declaration of Independence that were discussed in previous lessons—particularly the principle of “the consent of the governed.” If needed, revisit these principles in Sphere Education’s [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#). Ask the following questions to facilitate students’ thinking about these principles and their relationship to the play as an allegory.

- How might the principles of the Declaration of Independence be illuminated in *The Crucible*? What vehicles are used to reveal these principles?
- Think about the principle of “the consent of the governed.” If this principle is a tenor that contributes to the allegorical meaning of *The Crucible*, what is the vehicle? In other words, what structure or frame is carrying this hidden idea to the audience?
- Think about the idea of coercive conformity, which we discussed in the acts 2 and 3 lesson. If this idea is a tenor that contributes to the allegorical meaning of *The Crucible*, what is the vehicle? What structure or frame is carrying this hidden idea to the audience?

VEHICLES FOR MEANING

STEP 1

To prepare students for the During Reading activities, hand out the “Uncovering Meaning in *The Crucible*” graphic organizer.

STEP 2

Project the following pictures and ask students what they show.





Tell students that these are pictures of crucibles. Crucibles are used for chemical reactions because they can withstand great heat and hold materials that have been heated to extremely high temperatures. Then ask students to put the word “crucible” in the box under “vehicle” in their graphic organizer.

STEP 3

Ask students to identify the tenor associated with the crucible. Direct students to think about the tenor as a test or a difficult experience that changes the people involved. Relate it to the play by articulating that the tests or trials endured by the characters changed the town of Salem in the process. Have students write this underneath “tenor” in their graphic organizer. See the table below as an example.

STEP 4

Have students articulate the ways that the vehicle and the tenor add depth to the allegorical meaning. Tell them that they will be looking for similar items in the During Reading activity as they read act 4.

*Note: In the following example, the allegorical meaning involves Miller using the Salem witch trials as a way to show the intensity of the McCarthy trials. The example table with the information from steps 2–4 is shown here.

Vehicle	Tenor	How this adds depth to the allegory
Crucible	The test s/ trials that transformed all the characters of the play and Salem itself	In <i>The Crucible</i> , the image of a crucible (as symbolized by the title) adds to the play's allegorical meaning because it helps me picture the intensity of the Salem witch trials and imagine the similarity of experience during the McCarthy era. Both eras experienced societal tests that changed those who lived in the societies

DURING READING

Transition to the next activity by reminding students that plot, character traits, and a character's reasoning are important to this play (remind them that *The Crucible* is written as a Greek tragedy). Therefore, students should not only read act 4 and look for the vehicles and tenors that enrich the allegorical meaning, but they should also note passages that help them better understand the plot and characters.

Have students read act 4 and complete the "Uncovering Meaning in *The Crucible*" graphic organizer.

AFTER READING

The goal of this part of the lesson is to help students see that the relationship dynamics between characters in *The Crucible* represent the ongoing struggle between individual rights and societal pressures. Looking back at previous American literary texts (such as *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), we can see the same struggle present itself. Yet, in the words of Allan Carey in Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#), "Much of American history can be understood as an attempt to better live up to the principles and promise of the United States." The question is, how does *The Crucible* help us better live up to the Declaration's principles?

DISCUSS ACT 4

STEP 1

Divide students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions:

- How did the end of the play land with you? What was the most surprising or unexpected thing that happened?
- In this final act, which characters represent a belief in individual rights? Which characters represent conformity to societal pressures?
- Why do you think John Proctor made the decision he did?
- Choose 2–3 key characters from the play and explain how these characters were transformed in act 4. What internal or external conflicts led to their transformation (for better or worse)?
- Overall, what do the characters in *The Crucible* show us about democracy? What was Miller hoping we would better understand at the end of this play?

STEP 2

After students have had a chance to discuss, debrief the questions as a whole class. Then return to the idea of tenors and vehicles as a way to discuss the relationships between characters. Explain that relationships between characters can serve as vehicles for better understanding of a hidden meaning.

STEP 3

Ask students the following questions:

- Which relationships (between 2 or more characters) are vehicles for hidden meanings?
- How do these relationships deepen your understanding of unalienable rights or the social pressure to conform?

*Note: If students need a refresher on unalienable rights, guide them to read the "Natural Rights" section of Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#).

Write

Tell students that they are going to engage in an activity that will help them grapple with the ways that relationships in *The Crucible* elucidate a deeper understanding of the play. After students have finished the writing activity, you may choose to have them share their journals in small groups so that they can see the viewpoint diversity that occurs when a group of people respond to the same text.

CHARACTER PERSPECTIVE JOURNALS

Give students the following prompt.

Prompt:

Choose a character from *The Crucible* and write a series of fictional journal entries in which the character reflects on the struggle between unalienable rights and the social pressure to conform. As you are writing, refer to your chosen character's interactions with other characters and explore how these could be catalysts for questions related to conformity, coercion, and individual rights.

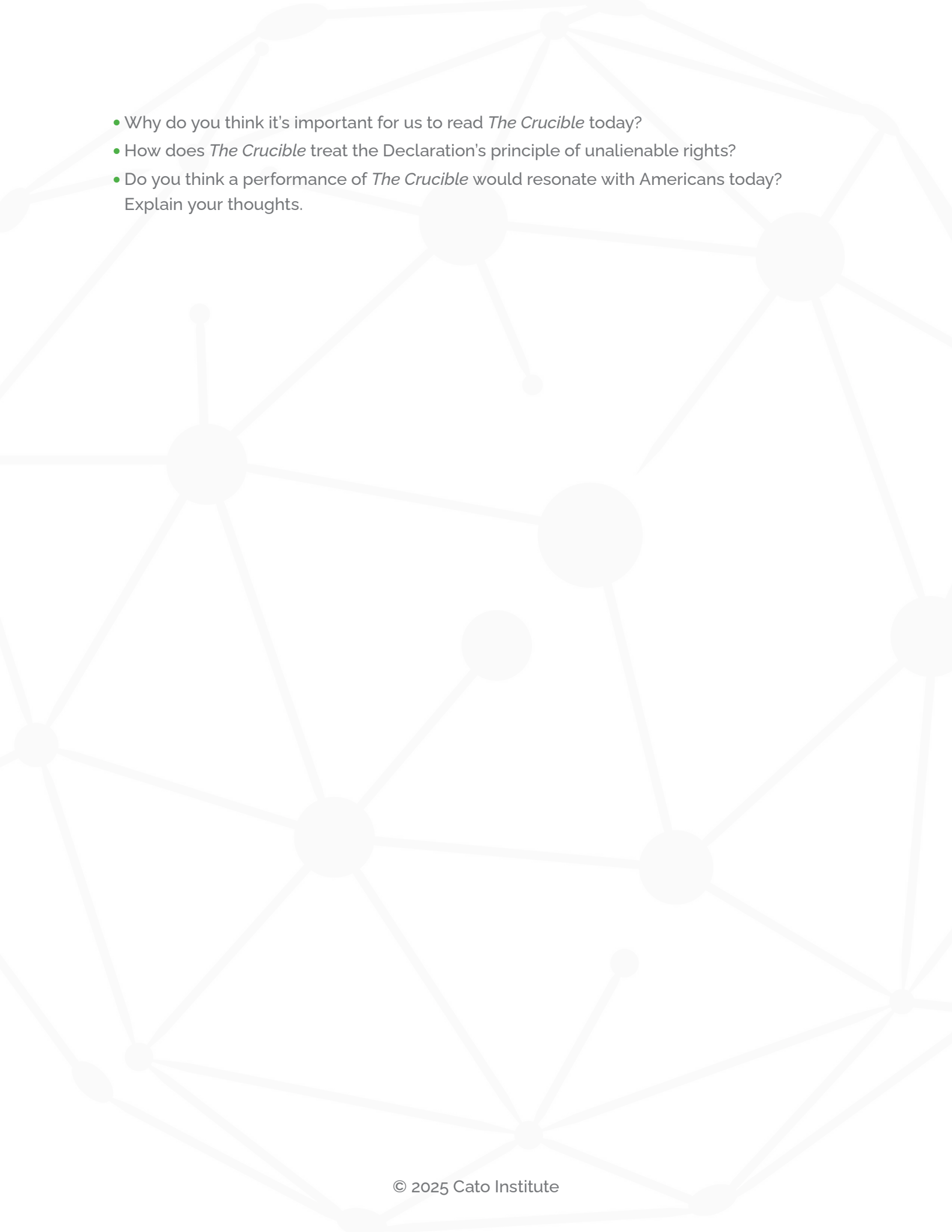
Considerations:

- Complete 5–7 journal entries.
- Cognitively empathize with the play's characters and the challenging situations they face.
- Maintain an awareness of the allegorical meaning and intentions of Arthur Miller.
- Think critically about the struggles Miller is illuminating and how these struggles are similar to or different from our current era.

Closing

In closing, ask students to reflect on the following questions individually or in discussion with others. *Note: You may also choose to have students write their responses before discussing with a partner or in a small group.

- Why do you think Arthur Miller thought it was important to write *The Crucible*?

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- Why do you think it's important for us to read *The Crucible* today?
 - How does *The Crucible* treat the Declaration's principle of unalienable rights?
 - Do you think a performance of *The Crucible* would resonate with Americans today?
- Explain your thoughts.

Uncovering Meaning in The Crucible

Instructions: Identify the vehicles and tenors that deepen the audience's understanding of the allegorical meaning of The Crucible. Then explain how they add to that deeper understanding.

Vehicle	Tenor	How this adds depth to the allegory