

Comparing Contexts: making meaningful connections

Historical and social contexts:

Year of Wonders and *The Crucible* share some historical similarities, although the two timeframes are twenty-seven years apart and the settings are on different continents. The novel is set in rural England in 1665 and 1666, twenty-seven years before the events of the play in colonial America in 1692.

The English people of the mid 1600s had been through a series of civil wars fought over power and religion. Oliver Cromwell's Puritan-leaning parliament had overthrown the Stuart monarchy in 1651 in part because he and his followers distrusted the hierarchy of the Church of England. However, by 1665 when the novel is set, the Restoration of the monarchy and the reign of Charles II had returned some semblance of social order to the country and re-established traditional hierarchical structures. Although Eyam is a remote place far removed from affairs of state in London and Canterbury, the politics of the time is evident in the presence of the Puritans who remain on the margins of the town. The Puritans, affiliated in certain ways with the working classes, were Protestants who sought a more ascetic and Bible-based Christian life. Some regard Cromwell as a warmongering, treasonous, religious zealot and military dictator, while to others he is a class revolutionary who sought to liberate working people from monarchical and aristocratic corruption. There are numerous references to this period of British history in *Year of Wonders*. Aggrieved Puritans remain quietly in Eyam. Indeed, the previous rector of the town, Mr Stanley and the tragic young girl, Jane Martin, are two who feature prominently. The complex social politics of Britain in the mid-1600s are apparent in Eyam, the Bradfords and Elinor representing the aristocracy, while there are also rural landowners, farmers, ambitious Protestant religious leaders, miners, and peasants. The town is populated by Protestants, Puritans, Quakers and pagans such as Mem and Anys Gowdie, and some may also have clandestinely held Catholic sympathies—England had only a century before repudiated Catholicism after the death of Queen Mary I in 1558.

The latter part of the 1600s is also the period of the Enlightenment, in which Protestant denominations generally regarded God more as merciful and loving than wrathful. Albeit, the outbreak of Plague in Eyam certainly does ignite some townsfolk's views that God smites immorality. This reactionary attitude is evinced by the lynching of the Gowdies and by those who turn to self-flagellation, such as John Gordon. The Enlightenment was also characterised by increasing industrialisation and by early breakthroughs in a more scientific approach to medicine and research. In the 1600s, Britain was colonising the Americas, and Puritan religious pilgrims began emigrating from England after the Restoration of the monarchy and installation of Charles II as king in 1660. Thus, the period in which events in Eyam take place is influenced not just by the horrible outbreak of Bubonic Plague, but also by a great number of other social and political factors.

Massachusetts in 1692 was part of the New World, having been colonised by emigrant Europeans, many of whom were fleeing religious tumult and persecution. Miller characterises the Puritans of Salem as carrying 'about an air of innate resistance, even of persecution.' 'Their fathers had, of course, been persecuted in England. So now they and their church found it necessary to deny any other sect its freedom, lest their New Jerusalem be defiled and corrupted by wrong ways and deceitful ideas. They believed... they held in their steady hands the candle that would light the world.' The difference between Eyam in 1665 and Salem in 1692 is that the latter is a frontier society of settlers who are also invaders, with a theocratic government that fosters conformity as a bulwark against the Indigenous inhabitants—Abigail's parents have been killed by American Indians, for instance. Contrastingly, Eyam is a town with a long British history of devout religious observance and entrenched social hierarchy, but until the Plague outbreak, differing beliefs are tolerated to an extent. While the Salem that Miller depicts reveals the dangers of extreme and self-righteous fundamentalism,

the events that occur in Brooks' *Eyam* remind readers why pluralism and rationalism must be defended.

The Crucible and *Year of Wonders* both present instances of great human failing, but also explore the capacity for people to rise above tragedy, immorality and bitterness, and do the right thing. Both texts show that in a time of trial it can be challenging and complex to remain true to one's own moral compass, to preserve one's rationality and to maintain a gracious selflessness. Miller and Brooks highlight the self-sacrifice required to achieve such qualities; John Proctor must give up his reputation and his life, Elizabeth Proctor her husband, and Anna Frith must confront her greatest fears. Nonetheless, both authors convey that the benevolence exhibited by such difficult self-sacrifice is its own reward. In the final line of *The Crucible*, Elizabeth Proctor says about her husband's decision to preserve his integrity even in the face of death, 'He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him.'

Each of the texts also explores those who, despite their best efforts, cannot maintain their resolve, such as Mary Warren and Jane Martin, or whose resolve is misguided, such as Michael Mompellion and Reverend Hale. **The depictions of the historical events that occurred in Salem and Eyam contain evidence about why people must not fall prey to hysteria or scapegoating, and instead strive to calmly, morally and rationally cooperate to solve social problems and negotiate ideological differences.** [Jake: note how this shared VVC (view/concern) is very relevant to the current state of the world in relation to vaccines and lockdowns.]

Take notes on:

- In what ways are the contexts (history and society) between the two texts similar? (some dot-points)
- In what **meaningful** way/s are they different? (dot-points)
- Therefore: what are the **meaningful connections**? (If you feel you have already answered this question while doing the first two – don't feel you need to write them twice.)