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Essay 3

Cold War Culture and Its Influence on Literature

The tense, fearful feeling in the culture of the Cold War in the United States filtered down from international confrontation and apocalyptic threat. The overshadowing fear of nuclear winter and of Communist or totalitarian takeover manifested itself in the thoughts of ordinary citizens. In addition, this feeling of dread for the future influenced the writers of the period, who may not have outright explained or articulated each fear and aspect of horror for the future but instead intimated a pessimistic spirit about the future of their threatened world. Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*, Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* all reflect a pessimistic vision of the present and near future due to the atmosphere fostered by the Cold War.

The massive conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, the two superpowers that emerged directly after World War II (Gaddis, *A New History* 46), the Cold War was a strange conflict shrouded in secrecy. "There were no surprise attacks, no declarations of war" (Gaddis, *A New History* 27). It was a war blurred at the edges, with "neither a precise beginning or ending" (Pessen 19), but one of pent-up aggressions. "It was not a shooting war. . . the two great antagonists of the cold war, the United States and the Soviet Union, at no time fired weapons in anger against each other" (Pessen 19). The threat of nuclear war, of "mutual assured destruction" (Engelhardt 271), and the American government and public's Communist phobia, were the dominant cultural manifestations of this unique conflict that spanned more than a half-

century. These fears were reflected in the contemporary literature: in a world of seemingly imminent war with the Communist superpower, these writers crafted a terrible, though thankfully not real, vision of the future.

After the United States dropped nuclear bombs on Japan in order to facilitate that nation's surrender in 1945, the ominous specter of the Bomb lurked in the world's consciousness. The threat of destruction radiated almost from the moment of the Hiroshima blast. “ ‘In that terrible flash 10,000 miles away, men have seen not only the fate of Japan, but have glimpsed the future of America,’ the *New York Times*'s James Reston wrote in August 1945. One day after the Hiroshima attack, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* warned that scientists may have ‘signed the mammalian world's death warrant.’ When the Soviet Union set off an atomic bomb in 1949, the United States began a blueprint of life after nuclear war” (George 21). And by the 1960s, “most Americans had a vision of nuclear war: towering mushroom clouds, sudden devastation, an eerily empty landscape, and death, perhaps even mankind's end” (George 19). The notion of total physical destruction, either through accidental detonation or outright provoked conflict, was a terrifying prospect after President Harry Truman's order to drop the bomb on Japan. “The ‘great fear’ that ‘we,’ not ‘they,’ might be the next victims of nuclear extermination was to chase America through the coming decades. Almost immediately, newspapers, the magazines, then radio, and throughout the 1950s television began to picture in graphic and terrifying detail an America reduced to a vaporized wasteland” (Engelhardt 56). Both the United States and the Soviet Union began an unprecedented arms buildup, especially of nuclear weapons, directly after the Second World War ended (Pessen 25). The possibility of nuclear war seemed like “a part of daily life, and a nightmare waiting to happen” (George 21).

The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 highlighted and legitimized this paranoia. “Almost everyone . . . regards it as the moment at which the world came closer than ever before, or since, to a nuclear conflagration” (Gaddis, *We Now Know* 260). Fidel Castro led a coup-d’état in Cuba in 1959 and established a communist government. This tiny island was a convenient spot for their huge ally, the Soviet Union, to station nuclear weapons (Kagan 992). Under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviets began to secretly put missiles in Cuba. “In response, the American government, under President Kennedy, blockaded Cuba, halted the shipment of new missiles, and demanded the removal of existing installations” (Kagan 992-3). After a week of tense negotiations, during which time it seemed that nuclear holocaust was inevitable, the Soviets backed down and crisis was averted. “At all times during the crisis, sixty American B-52s were airborne, with fifty-two carrying 196 nuclear weapons” (George 53). The threat had been real; people’s fears were legitimized, even as they breathed a sigh of temporary relief. “Nuclear war’s image, part fact and part science fiction, had become a part of the American psyche” (George 19).

The terrifying physical implications of such a war shocked the western world: “The impact on the United States of an all-out nuclear attack by us, ‘even if unanswered by the Russians,’ would be catastrophic. . . . ‘within minutes of a 65 megaton [bomb] attack on the United States,’ 83 million people would be dead” (Pessen 97). In addition to the physical possibilities, the political interplay was a hostile, dangerous game: “Nuclear weapons . . . required statesmen to become actors: success or failure depended, or so it seemed, not on what one was really doing, but on what one *appeared* to be doing” (Gaddis, *We Know Now* 258). It was in this environment of fear that writers Nevil Shute (*On the Beach*) and Walter M. Miller (*A Canticle for Leibowitz*) wrote terrifying visions of a future after nuclear war.

“As time passed, the radioactivity would also; with a cobalt half-life of about five years these streets and houses would be habitable again in twenty years at the latest, and probably sooner than that. The human race was to be wiped out and the world made clean again for wiser occupants without undue delay” (Shute, *On the Beach*, qtd. by George 19). Published in 1957, the British-American’s book chronicled a world in which the atomic war is over and the people are awaiting the fallout and its fatal effects. *On the Beach* “was widely read, and it was to prove the most influential work of its kind for the next quarter of a century and the only one most people ever read” (Brians, “The History”). The tragic book’s allure lay in “its insistence on the relentless, inescapable advance of the zone of radioactivity, removing all trace of human life from latitude after latitude on its way south” (Brians, “The History”). Unlike other novels of the age, *On the Beach* constantly insists that everyone will die; nuclear fallout spares no one. Instead of convenient plot devices utilized by other science-fiction writers of the day, Shute does not shade or blur the tragedy with distractions; death is always on the horizon for everyone. “For once . . . no invading aliens, no super-fallout shelters to protect the protagonists, no struggle back from a dreadful but exciting postwar barbarism. There are simply a man and a woman reaching the agonizing decision to kill their only child in its crib and commit suicide as the rest of the human race expires around them” (Brians, “The History”).

This terrifying post-apocalyptic vision was a product of its age, in which the Soviets had recently tested nuclear weapons of their own and in which both superpowers realized the potential catastrophe they were speeding toward.

It is quite irrelevant that the sort of universal extinction through fallout which Shute depicts is almost impossible . . . Nor does it matter that the recently developed theories of nuclear winter make Shute's pessimism seem somewhat more realistic. What gives the

novel its significance is the fact that it forced the general public to focus on atomic war as a threat to personal existence at a time when there was widespread concern about fallout from testing. . . . Although many nuclear war novels superior to Shute's were to be published in succeeding years, none of them would be nearly as widely read. (Brians, "The History")

Actress Ava Gardner, who starred in the 1959 film adaptation directed by Stanley Kramer, noted in her biography that "It was a fictional scenario, but my God, everyone in the cast and crew knew it could happen" (Nevil Shute Foundation, "The Film"). Shute's haunting vision of a "cloud of death" was a grim realization of Cold War terrors.

Walter M. Miller's only novel published during his lifetime was the post-apocalyptic *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, published in 1960. The eerie novel "tells the story of Man from the atomic deluge forward. It begins after the near annihilation of the earth, at which time a few men had gone into monasteries to preserve the knowledge that Man had accumulated until—ages later—he will have use for it again" (Ducharme 1042). This second lapse into the dark ages because of the horrific consequences of the Bomb is plausible in Miller's world, one decimated by men who knew too much. One of the men who is later lauded as "blessed" was one who caused a latter-day Fall—the nuclear destruction—by the name of Isaac Edward Leibowitz, who converted to Roman Catholicism after leaving the U.S. military's nuclear program. The story spans centuries as civilization rebuilds itself, and throughout the novel Miller "place[s] most of the emphasis on the moral issues of Man's way—his life and survival" (Ducharme 1043).

Gradually, man regains his scientific feet—but not without some discomfort in the Roman Catholic Church, one of the major players in the novel. By the third part of the novel, hundreds of years have passed since Leibowitz's knowledge preservation work—and man is

once again embroiled in a cold war, armed again with nuclear technology and weapons. Another nuclear attack ensues, and the Abbey offers shelter to those suffering from radiation poisoning. Here Miller strikingly points to the concept that history repeats itself—as he perhaps feared it would if the Americans and Soviets did follow through with the promised mutual assured destruction. “The cyclical theme of technological progress and regress which is the foundation-stone on which *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is built is present in much of Miller’s earlier writing, too” (Samuelson, “The Lost Canticles”). Uniquely, Miller’s take on post-apocalypse and its return was focused on the individual: “When the mass of American and British science fiction magazines were top-heavy with laboratories, machines, and the "social" effects of science and technology . . . Miller was one of a handful of writers concerned with effects on individuals, who stand alone, lacking the kind of certainty that only dogma can provide, and aware of both the lack and the inadequacy of the outmoded dogma” (Samuelson, “The Lost Canticles”).

The second component of fear in America during the Cold War was that of totalitarian or Communist takeover, a strident East versus West sentiment. “U.S. politicians stressed the evils of a totalitarian state, a tactic that let them use that war as a foreshadowing of World War III, linking Communism with Fascism and Soviet leaders” (George 24). The American president Ronald Reagan’s famous Cold War rhetoric in the 1980s, describing the Soviet Union as “an evil empire” (qtd. by Kagan 995), continued the popular perception of Communism threatening democratic interests. Strikingly, some historians note that “many Americans believed nuclear war was an acceptable risk in the Cold War battle against Communism. Following World War II, fear of Communism often seemed to outweigh fear of nuclear war” (George 21). Much of the United States’ Cold War-era foreign policy was tinged with these sentiments of democracy versus communism:

American objectives also ranged well beyond the territorial confines of the Soviet empire. Treating the entire world as an arena of mortal combat between the Free World and the forces of totalitarianism, American policymakers sought to prevent the emergence of communist or pro-Soviet regimes anywhere on earth. Acting on the premise that those who were not for us were against us, American leaders were also cold if not hostile toward noncommunist but neutralist governments and movements. Our goal was a world composed of anti-Soviet, pro-American states. (Pessen 21-22)

In addition to the anti-Red efforts abroad, the U.S. government “launched an aggressive campaign against the Communist party and communist influence at home” (Pessen 127). As writer Edward Pessen noted in his cultural chronicle *Losing Our Souls: The American Experience in the Cold War*, “Private citizens, singly and in groups, conservative reporters and columnists, high government officials, and the courts played key roles in promoting the anticommunist crusade. An atmosphere of fear and hysteria breeds irrational behavior, infecting even persons of unusual learning, intellect, and reputations for tolerance and liberalism” (144-6).

The Communist himself was “a frighteningly indistinct creature. Even propaganda images meant to alert the public to Communist characteristics lacked definition. . . . The less evidence there was of their presence, the more obvious it was that they or their sympathizers were secretly at work in society” (Engelhardt 99). Communists were the shadow around the corner, the “shape-shifting monsters lurking, as in any child’s nightmare, right under America’s bed and intent on establishing a group-mind dictatorship by ‘treachery, deceit, infiltration . . . espionage, sabotage, terrorism and any other means necessary’ (in the words of the Internal Security Act of 1950)” (Engelhardt 125). The crusade to discover the monster and root it out, an extension of the arms race that average citizens could palpably be a part of, was on.

This anti-communist hysteria was rampant, especially in the 1950s and 1960s; an initiative was launched to root out the Soviet “fifth-column,” to quote FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, present within the States, that was sure to overthrow the government at the behest of its Soviet masters (Pessen 133). Senator Joseph McCarthy, one of the most strident anticommunists in American political history, was particularly instrumental in such witchhunts to expose the Red Menace: “Holding nothing sacred, McCarthy charged the U.S. Army, General George C. Marshall, President Eisenhower, and lesser lights with playing the communist game. . . . he won the attention of the American public” (Pessen 153). The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was a particularly prominent player in the efforts to destroy any shred of potential American communism. Author and playwright Arthur Miller notes that

the Red hunt, led by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and by McCarthy, was becoming the dominating fixation of the American psyche. It reached Hollywood when the studios, after first resisting, agreed to submit artists' names to the House Committee for ‘clearing’ before employing them. This unleashed a veritable holy terror among actors, directors, and others, from Party members to those who had had the merest brush with a front organization. (Miller, “Why I Wrote”)

The group most affected was the Hollywood Ten, indicted for contempt of Congress for refusing to name names. “The so-called Hollywood Ten . . . were employed as writers, actors, or producers in the film industry and could not steal (nor were they so accused) state secrets. Their ‘crime’ was the message of the film they created” (Pessen 137). Miller himself was subpoenaed by the HUAC in 1956 and “was cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to identify writers I had met at one of the two communist writers' meetings I had attended many years before” (Miller, “Are You Now”). Miller goes on to note that the chairman of the HUAC told Miller’s

lawyer he would drop the hearing if Marilyn Monroe, Miller's wife-to-be, would consent to a photo. However, "the offer having been declined, the good chairman, as my hearing came to an end, entreated me to write less tragically about our country. This lecture cost me \$40,000 in lawyer's fees, a year's suspended sentence for contempt of Congress, and a \$500 fine. Not to mention about a year of inanition in my creative life" (Miller, "Are You Now").

In that universe of paranoia Miller penned *The Crucible*, written and first performed in 1953 (Burns, "Fact & Fiction"), which ostensibly references the events of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. However, it instead reflects Miller's aforementioned experience with McCarthyism and the Red Scare in Hollywood. Said Miller in a 2000 editorial in *The Guardian*,

It would probably never have occurred to me to write a play about the Salem witch trials of 1692 had I not seen some astonishing correspondences with that calamity in the America of the late 40s and early 50s. My basic need was to respond to a phenomenon which, with only small exaggeration, one could say paralysed a whole generation and in a short time dried up the habits of trust and toleration in public discourse. I can't remember anyone calling it an ideological war, but I think now that that is what it amounted to.

(Miller, "Are You Now")

Miller wished to show not only the horrors and paranoia during the calamities of that 1692 Puritan New England town, but also to reflect a horrible period in America's history. Miller notes that in both times, "Words had gotten fearsome" (Miller, "Are You Now"):

Turning to Salem was like looking into a petri dish, an embalmed stasis with its principal moving forces caught in stillness. More than a political metaphor, more than a moral tale, *The Crucible*, as it developed over more than a year, became the awesome evidence of the power of human imagination inflamed, the poetry of suggestion, and the tragedy of

heroic resistance to a society possessed to the point of ruin. . . . *The Crucible* straddles two different worlds to make them one, but it is not history in the usual sense of the word, but a moral, political and psychological construct that floats on the fluid emotions of both eras. (Miller, “Are You Now”)

Miller’s brilliant invective *The Crucible* is rife with paranoia—“the blind panic that, in our age, often seems to sit at the dim edges of consciousness” (Miller, “Why I Wrote”)—and his work now reflects a contemporary greatly frustrated by the present paranoia, trapped within it and helpless to stop it.

The Cold War’s lasting implications certainly are present in our modern culture; an examination of the roots, seeing the true horrors people alive for the conflict felt, amplifies the message left in the literature of the era. The history itself remains terrifying; the Cuban Missile Crisis was a walk on a razor’s edge, and any misstep could have triggered disaster for mankind. No wonder *On the Beach*, despite some of its literary shortcomings, was so effective in its day; little wonder *A Canticle for Leibowitz* has never gone out of print and is still held up as a classic, not just in science fiction, but in all literature. Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* is performed even now, its implications resonating in light of the continuing existence of totalitarian regimes. To examine the literature is to better understand the circumstances. Such a foray into this research is not just interesting, but to this generation, vital; let our mistakes not be repeated, as Walter M. Miller feared.

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