A History of Fear: Why the Salem Witch Trials Keep Happening

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Introduction

Hodgson Vo-Tech High School (HVT) is one of four vocational-technical high schools in New Castle County. Located in Newark, Delaware, the school offers a wide selection of career paths tied to hands-on training and work experience. In order to graduate, students must complete the related coursework for their career area as well as perform satisfactorily in the traditional academic areas: science, social studies, math, and English. While many graduating seniors end up forgoing four-year universities in lieu of more targeted post-secondary education (via two-year programs such as those offered at Del Tech), increasing numbers of students are pursuing college degrees.

As I did last year, I will again be teaching ELA in grades 9 and 11 this year. One unique aspect of my course load is that I teach both full-year (43-minute classes a day for four marking periods) and semester-long (approximately 90-minute classes a day for two marking periods) ELA 11th classes, which makes planning and pacing tricky, as the two courses will be learning the same material but hardly ever at the same time. This will be my third year at HVT and my fourth year overall as a classroom teacher. My experience thus far teaching English at HVT has proved rewarding and successful, but not without its challenges. Teaching students the skills they need to read and write effectively while pushing through units that can last four weeks or more can result in frustration for me as well as them. Maintaining student interest is paramount to a successful classroom.

Rationale

This year, I participated in a Delaware Teachers Institute seminar titled "Numbers and Social Problems: Considering What Counts," which examines how public attitudes and perception can be influenced by number-based claims. Numbers are created by people and with purpose in mind, argues our seminar leader and University of Delaware sociology professor Dr. Joel Best. The area where work from our seminar would apply best is to my 11th grade classes. The curriculum for this grade level is provided by the textbook company SpringBoard and is tied to themes: the American Dream, the Marketplace of Ideas, the Power of Persuasion, the Pursuit of Happiness. For the Power of Persuasion, we read Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

In transitioning from the previous unit (the American Dream, which examines what it means to be an American and what kind of access to the American Dream people truly

have) to the Power of Persuasion (which examines Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* as well as rhetorical appeals), I like to work in a brief look at urban legends, including a non-fiction magazine piece, "Bump in the Night," I wrote several years ago during my time as a journalist that looks at a popular urban legend involving a stretch of Cossart Road just over the Delaware border into Pennsylvania. (Adding to the legend's history is the fact that film director M. Night Shyamalan used the eerie-looking woods around the area as the backdrop for his 2004 thriller *The Village*.) We discuss the hallmarks of urban legends (hard-to-verify source material; sketchy details; always happening to "a friend of a friend") and how they feed off fear and paranoia—a perfect segue into the fire-and-brimstone, finger-pointing world of Salem found in *The Crucible*.

It is at this point where I'd like to rearrange some of the pieces to make room for the work we've done in seminar. Traditionally, we read *The Crucible* as it's intended—as a play, with parts assigned and acted out. We then spend time in each class examining evidence from Miller's language that shapes these characters and their motivations. Often, this comes by way of memorable lines from characters such as John Proctor and Judge Danforth, whose respective stubbornness create the story's central conflict. Following the conclusion of these activities, we watch the 1996 movie adaptation, starring Daniel Day-Lewis as John Proctor and Winona Ryder as Abigail Williams, noting the similarities and differences between the text and the film.

This year, I would like to try a different approach, for several reasons. Because I have a large contingent of special-education students, I plan to first show the film, so students can get a visual sense of the dramatic plot and characters. We will then look at specific portions of the text having to do with the story's morality and themes. Also, because *The Crucible* is just one piece in the Power of Persuasion unit, this strategy allows us to work through the entire play in a more timely fashion.

There is also, I believe, a key piece from the instruction of *The Crucible* that could be further developed. The story's events take place in 1692 in the small village of Salem, Massachusetts and are a fictionalized account of the very real witch-hunts that occurred there[1]. To appreciate *The Crucible*, students must first understand the Puritan ideals that dictated life in the village. The English settlers who came to Massachusetts in the 1630s did so for religious reasons, and a cement-tight bond between church and state remained intact well into the next century. While accusations of witchcraft may sound ridiculous today, back then it made a lot of sense, given the climate of Salem. "Religion was used to explain everything," commented our seminar leader, sociology and criminal justice professor Dr. Joel Best. Any defection from the church was seen as heresy. Compounding this was a strong belief in community interests over those of the individual. Children were put to work at an early age; dancing and music for recreational purposes (for "sport," Rev. Parris calls it in *The Crucible*[2]) were not allowed. Family and neighborly feuds over land and other possessions were common. Lastly, paranoia over Native

American retribution may have also played a role (Abigail Williams notes having seen "Indians smash my dear parents' heads on the pillow next to mine").[3]

Whatever the factors, in the end, 19 people were hanged over accusations of witchcraft, with one more pressed to death and at least four more having died in prison.[4] With this outcome in mind, it is important that students understand that history does indeed repeat itself. Our meaning behind a "witch" or "witch-hunt" has transformed from literal to figurative. We could just as easily substitute a Salem witch in 1692 for an accused Communist in the 1950s, a white teenager wearing a trench coat in the early 2000s, or a young black male wearing a "hoodie" sweatshirt today. In other words, when it comes to hysteria, we have short-term memory. We don't have a history of lessons tied to a deeper understanding of our past. We have a history of fear. And in order to be critical thinkers, students must go beyond the Salem Witch Trials to see not only how recent events have played out with similar results, but to research ways these types of events might have been avoided in the first place.

For my unit, students will research examples of a modern-day witch-hunt to examine how fear and hysteria persist in American culture.

Background

Children are told at an early age that history repeats itself. But being told and being taught, at least in respect to the concept of history, are two very different things. It is not easy for high school students to draw connections from one point in history to another. That is because, fundamentally, they lack historical knowledge. This makes sense: we are still teaching them history. Context comes with experience both inside and outside the classroom; it is not until much later that they understand how the big pieces of time and space fit together.

This is not a disadvantage, however. In fact, it might just be the opposite. Because students are still absorbing much of their basic historical knowledge, the timing is ripe to help them see how the characteristics of different historical events are linked together in important ways. This can help them see things through the lens of a critical thinker.

In seminar, we looked at many social-problem case studies where fear and hysteria clouded good judgment. Here, I'd like to outline several case studies that have made an impact on my unit.

The Perceived Health Risks of Breast Implants

The story of breast implants is a perfect example of guilty until proven innocent, an idea *The Crucible* explores at length. First developed in the 1960s, breast implants were for decades considered safe, "although there was no evidence on this point."[5] Still, the safety

of breast implants went largely uncontested. But in 1988, breast-implant manufacturers were asked by the Food and Drug Administration to produce proof that breast implants did not cause health risks to their hosts. And this is where the public perception of breast implants changes forever.

A series of events around this time led the public's perception of breast implants to change from nonchalant to hysterical, and the parallels bear an uncanny resemblance to the Salem Witch Trials. First, anecdotal reports from overseas began circulating in the medical world, hinting at a relationship between breast implants and connective-tissue disease. The news soon hit the states; several multi-million-dollar lawsuits were filed. Then, CBS TV reporter Connie Chung caught wind of the story, profiling women believed to have autoimmune disease as a result of their implants. Public officials grew concerned and further raised the issue's profile.[6]

By the early 1990s, the anxiety had reached a fever pitch. FDA Commissioner David Kessler pushed manufacturers to provide evidence of the implants' safety. The findings were deemed insufficient, and in 1992, Kessler banned implants entirely, "except for use in clinical trials of breast reconstruction after cancer surgery."[7] Kessler's rationale is important to note:

> The ban, Kessler was careful to point out, was not because implants had been found dangerous, but because they had not been proved safe. As he explained, it is the responsibility of manufacturers to show medical devices are safe, not the FDA's responsibility to show they are not. The breast-implant manufacturers had simply not fulfilled their obligation to produce evidence of safety.[8]

In the aftermath of this ruling, the lawsuits poured in—one company, which later filed for bankruptcy protection, claimed to be named in 20,000 of them—and astronomical verdicts were paid out, including one to a woman in Houston for $25 million. Many women with breast implants began complaining of "a variety of illnesses," leading to the biggest class-action settlement—$4.25 billion—in history.[9]

Meanwhile, no hard proof could successfully link breast implants to any major health risk. "What we saw in the courtroom and in much of the media, at least at the time of the ban," Marcia Angell, writing in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, remarks, "were judgments based on anecdote and speculation."[10]

In Salem, the burden of proof was on the defendant: an accused witch had to prove that he or she was not one. But that was nearly impossible—how do you prove you *didn't* do something? Those who fought the accusations at trial and lost—which was likely to happen—were put to death. And so it made sense to admit guilt and walk away with your life. Assuming guilt before innocence cost the people of Salem dearly. Three hundred years later, the manufacturers of breast implants learned the same.

Gulf War Syndrome

In the early-to-mid 1990s, news stories began appearing reporting a scary trend of illnesses affecting soldiers who served in the Persian Gulf War. The reporting of this condition, known as Gulf War Syndrome, or GWS, soon took flight, and what began as a few hundred news stories reached 4,000 by 1997.[11] Complications ranged from glowing vomit (a result of contact with Chemlite tubes, apparently) and early Alzheimer's to birth defects in the children of GWS sufferers and cancers, such as lymphoma, which can take years to form. *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Newsday*, and *60 Minutes* were among the prominent media who reported on GWS.[12] It was a full-fledged health crisis.

Except it wasn't, at least according to Michael Fumento, an Army veteran-turned-investigative reporter who dubbed the phenomenon Gulf Lore Syndrome and debunked many of its claims. "[GWS] is a world in which science is replaced by rumor," Fumento wrote, "in which vets are presented as medical experts while real medical experts are ignored."[13] This comment can be applied to the events of *The Crucible* when we think of the introduction of Rev. Jonathan Hale. Here is a seemingly reasonable, well-educated man brought to Salem to investigate the witchcraft accusations. He is at first impartial, neither convinced nor unconvinced of Satanic activity. But when the allegations become farcical, he can no longer sit idly, and he eventually comes to the defense of the innocent by using clear-headed logic. The villagers of Salem, however, are far too interested in finding more witches and watching them hanged, and do not heed Hale's warnings.

As is the case with the breast-implants scare, anecdotal evidence trumps scientific reasoning. As we learned in seminar, widening the sample base, or what's counted, will inevitably produce larger numbers. Once a handful of victims appears, more follow, multiplying the types of symptoms assumed to be linked with the mysterious condition. Fumento's summary mirrors that which drove the rumor mill in the Salem Witch Trials: the mangling of cause and effect.

> Much of what drives the GWS myth is the simplest of fallacies: that if something happens after a given event, it must have been caused by that event. The GWS fallacy works like this: The vets were obviously healthy when they went to the Gulf, or they wouldn't have been sent. Now they're sick. Therefore it must have been something in the Gulf that made them ill.[14]

In *The Crucible*, this misunderstanding of cause and effect is all over Salem leading up to the witch trials. Goody Putnam has lost seven children shortly after childbirth, a devastating set of circumstances. Out of frustration, Goody Putnam questions the motives of Tituba, a slave who has a reputation for voodoo-like practices. This leads Goody Putnam to incorrectly assume that the introduction of Tituba and the subsequent deaths of her children are somehow linked. Elsewhere, Giles Corey mentions seeing his wife,

Martha, read "strange books," after which he cannot say his prayers. Cattle die mysteriously; children fall ill at the sight of others. With fear spreading so quickly over such a small village—fear not only that the devil is alive and well in Salem but that you could be so breezily accused of consorting with him—it is not hard to understand, in hindsight, how logic and reasoning gave way to poor judgment.

The Crack Scare of 1986

The Crack Scare of 1986 is another example of anecdotal evidence used in place of concrete data in order to make a point or push an agenda. It is also a case study in fear by way of a perceived threat to children—much like the way a group of innocent-looking girls held the village of Salem in their palms by claiming they were being tormented by witches.

The Crack Scare of 1986 was fueled by a *Newsweek* cover story followed soon after by the overdose deaths of two high-profile athletes, Don Rogers and Len Bias.[15] As Dr. Best noted in seminar, Bias' death especially lent itself to media coverage, as Bias was a University of Maryland basketball standout recently drafted by the Boston Celtics. As such, two major metropolises—Washington, D.C. and Boston—held a heavy stake in the story and reported accordingly.

And so, America soon found itself inundated by a flood of news coverage proclaiming the threat of "crack," a smoke-able form of cocaine that produced a bigger high for less money. Not only that, the drug was creeping out of inner cities and into the suburbs, posing a threat to children, who might try it and get hooked. *Newsweek* ran the tagline "Kids and Cocaine" on their March 17, 1986 issue and made several bold predictions about teenagers and drug use. To believe *Newsweek* and other major media outlets, the problem wasn't a mere possibility, it was already happening. Additional coverage of the crack scare featured stories on the drug trade, struggling users, and babies born addicted to cocaine.[16]

But in examining both the media coverage and other studies on the issue, Amherst College researcher Jerome L. Himmelstein found that much of the coverage was made up of—as we've seen before—anecdotal evidence, this time supplied by drug dealers and police officers, not researchers. "Firsthand, everyday knowledge and those believed to have it trump scientific expertise in portraying the scope of the cocaine problem," Himmelstein writes.[17]

These anecdotes make for great stories but do little to help readers understand the true scope of the crack epidemic. "Overall, *Newsweek* paints the national cocaine epidemic as a series of local stories told by social problems workers and drug users and dealers," Himmelstein writes. "The articles give numbers brief attention, perhaps enough to suggest a broader picture, and then move on."[18]

As with the cultural context that allowed the Salem Witch Trials to happen, the Crack Scare may not have been the sensational news story it was had there not been a series of important factors paving its way. This was, after all, a decade where the War on Drugs was in full swing, fueled by the efforts of First Lady Nancy Reagan. Two prominent athletes die within eight days of each other in the summer of 1986. Then there's the kids: innocent, naïve teenagers looking for a thrill but with no idea what they're in for. Crack was new, cheap, and scary, and its putative trajectory from urban alleyways and crack houses to the white picket fences of Middle America made it that much more alarming. "Each new drug is thought to be more dangerous than the one before it," Dr. Best noted in seminar. And just as quickly as the Crack Scare of 1986 took the spotlight, it crawled back, with news coverage declining by the end of that year.

The Crack Scare of 1986 was, in many ways, a perfect story. Readymade for journalists, it thrived on shock value ("crack babies") and an endless supply of sources— dealers and users, social workers and treatment counselors, police officers and law-enforcement agents—whose smaller stories could be woven into a larger narrative that potentially affected us all.

The Salem Witch Trials, too, make for a great story. Why else would Miller turn them into a morality play? It has a list of factors—religious climate, turf wars, etc.—that made the village fertile ground for hysteria. The accused, the accusers, and the villagers who look on provide a cast of characters. It also shares, at its core, a perceived threat to children. *The Crucible* is that narrative. As for the Crack Scare of 1986, the journalistic adage that the truth shouldn't get in the way of a good story is worth considering.

The "Failure" of the U.S. Education System

Few topics strike a nerve with so many different types of people as the everlasting debate over what to do about American schools. It's a conversation that involves teachers, administrators, and other educators; parents; taxpayers; politicians; and pundits in the media. And let's not forget about the students. We are behind our international counterparts, critics argue, and the forecast could spell disaster. We won't be able to compete in the world economy, so much of it driven by success in math and science, which U.S. students are lacking.

But are we really doing that poorly? In seminar, we spent a great deal of time looking at where numbers come from. Dr. Best made the comment early on that "all numbers are socially constructed." In other words, a number is only that until we give it a purpose. (Or to quote a memorable album title from one of my favorite bands, *A Bell Is a Cup...Until It Is Struck*.) We can bend and twist and shape these numbers to serve a variety of purposes, especially if our sample size is already skewed toward a desired result. Survey research is a common example. One survey does not tell the whole story. Researchers Erling E. Boe

and Sujie Shin noted as much when they compared six surveys that examined how U.S. students fared against students from other industrialized countries over a 20-year period, 1991 to 2001. Among their findings were that U.S. students were only "somewhat below average" in math while ranking highly in civics, reading, and science:

> Thus when all four subjects are weighted equally, U.S. students generally perform above average in international comparisons, not poorly. There are many good reasons for improving the effectiveness of U.S. public education, but not because students generally perform poorly in comparison with their peers from other industrialized nations.[19]

Even if we were to grow anxious over those math results, explanations exist. First, as kids work through adolescence, it is natural to see a decline in academic performance. Second, the sample representation was partially imbalanced. One survey was given to students during their final year of secondary education. The age of students during their final year of secondary education varies from nation to nation; in the United States, it's typically 17 or 18, or Grade 12. But some countries have up to eight years of secondary education, and so the actual grade level and age of the students—and their accompanying scores—varied wildly.[20]

The lack of perspective and balance in survey research is a lesson in what happens when we produce results in a bubble. As noted earlier, religion was used as the basis of all explanation and reasoning in tiny Salem. Why was Salem a target? How was it possible that there were so many witches in one small village? "Remember, until an hour before the Devil fell, God thought him beautiful,"[21] says Rev. Hale to John Proctor in Act II, commenting upon the arrest of Rebecca Nurse, a village elder, nearly 60, who wouldn't hurt a fly. That's how. Evil is anywhere, and therefore, everywhere. "[D]epending on one's interest or agenda, a particular survey result can be selected to support almost any conclusion about how the U.S. stands in the international achievement horse race," researchers Boe and Shin write,[22] and the key word here is "particular." When we're looking for a result, we'll focus accordingly, despite the contrary evidence just out of view.

Examples from *Stat-Spotting*

Seminar also provided an opportunity to examine and discuss Dr. Best's published work on social problems. His 2008 book, *Stat-Spotting: A Field Guide to Identifying Dubious Data*, offers many examples of number-based claims tied to issues that have made the rounds in recent years: underage drinking, the effects of secondhand smoke, autism rates, pregnancy-related deaths, teen suicide, and so on. One of the key lessons from seminar that has stuck with me is Best's proposal of using statistical benchmarks—a framework of officially calculated numbers—"to let us begin to spot questionable figures."[23] For example, approximately 2.5 million people die in this country each year. From that

number, heart disease and cancer are responsible for about half. That leaves about 1.25 million additional deaths, with a variety of causes.[24] So when we see a claim that says 4 million women are battered to death by their male partners each year[25], or one that says a young person between the ages of 14 and 26 commits suicide every 13 minutes[26], we know this number, while not impossible, is most likely untrue, based on our annual-deaths benchmark. Whether these numbers were produced using faulty math or as a way to draw extra attention to an issue is hard to say. But knowing, as we do, that numbers can be used to influence public opinion and perception about social problems, they serve as strong lessons in understanding how numbers are socially constructed.

Modern-Day Witch-Hunts

Granted, many of the topics we studied in seminar would not fit into the teaching methods appropriate for this unit, both because the topics are of a sensitive nature and the reading material is far too academic for high school juniors to comprehend. With that in mind, here are topics I will introduce to my students for further study. They will select one and explain its relationship to a modern-day witch-hunt, as well as propose how the event may have been avoided based on the lessons of Salem.

The Case of the West Memphis Three

In 1994, a group of three teenagers were arrested and convicted of the murders of three younger boys, a brutal crime that took place in the woods of West Memphis, Arkansas. West Memphis is a city with a deeply embedded sense of fundamental Christianity, and the crimes were believed to have been committed as part of a satanic ritual.[27] (Like the great Halloween candy scare that Dr. Best has written extensively about, there are no documented incidents of murder by way of satanic ritual in the United States.) Despite the absence of DNA evidence or a murder weapon and the presence of faulty testimony and questionable police tactics, the three young men, later dubbed the West Memphis Three (WM3), were found guilty. The perceived ringleader of the group, Damien Echols, was a high school dropout known for wearing black clothing and listening to heavy-metal bands like Metallica. He received the harshest sentence, the death penalty, while Jason Baldwin and Jesse Misskelley Jr. each received life in prison. They continued to profess their innocence; advocacy groups were created and high-profile celebrities such as Johnny Depp and Natalie Maines voiced their support.[28] The WM3 would spend more than 18 years in prison before being released under the rare Alford plea: in order to walk free, the three men had to plead guilty.[29] Sound familiar? (In Salem, the accused could be spared death if they admitted to witchcraft.[30])

Racial Profiling in the Aftermath of 9/11

Along with Pearl Harbor, the events of Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001 are widely considered the most horrific to ever take place on American soil. Nearly 3,000 citizens were killed in a

series of four coordinated attacks using hijacked airplanes, carried out by members of the al-Qaeda terrorist organization, who were of Middle Eastern descent. In the wake of these attacks, new security measures were enforced across the nation's airports. The Dept. of Homeland Security and the U.S.A. Patriot were established, allowed the U.S. government more resources and flexibility to fight terrorism. This became the new war on terror. The government believed al-Qaeda and other terrorists were capable of turning the country's skies and other methods of civilian transportation into battlegrounds. Subsequently, it developed ways of screening passengers on flights that came under question as examples of racial profiling and Constitutional infringement. Because the 9/11 hijackers were able to successfully pass through airport security checks—including metal detectors—airports revamped their policies, often at the expense of citizen rights.[31]

There are many other examples of modern-day witch-hunts that could or will present themselves in class discussions, or that students may choose to research on their own. The most obvious of these is the anti-Communist Red Scare of the 1950s, which included the establishment of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and efforts led by Sen. Joe McCarthy. The House Committee went so far as to ask Hollywood studios for the names of actors and directors who might be Communists.[32] Miller himself has cited this as inspiration for writing *The Crucible*.[33] Other historical examples include the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII and the targeting of Jews during the Holocaust, although both of these examples require teaching more historical context. More modern-day examples include Major League Baseball's steroids scandal[34]; the National Basketball Association's dress-code policies[35]; the New York Police Dept.'s establishment of a division devoted to investigating the hip-hop music industry (commonly referred to as a rap-intelligence unit or the "hip-hop police")[36]; Dr. C. Delores Tucker's war on gangsta rap and its explicit lyrics in the 1990s[37]; Tipper Gore and the PMRC (Parents' Music Resource Center)'s similar battle against heavy-metal and rock bands a decade earlier[38]; and, on a more serious note, recent police shootings involving unarmed African-American men.[39]

Teaching Strategies & Activities

Lesson #1

In teaching various pieces of this unit in the past, it is clear that students first need a clear, working definition of what a "modern-day witch-hunt" is. To go a step further back, we need working definitions of both "witch" and "witch-hunt." For our purposes, we will define these terms, using a graphic organizer and Venn diagram (see Appendix 2), both in their Salem and post-Salem vernacular. As the villagers of Salem saw it,

> [A witch] tended to be someone who did not fit in. She was a woman who had few
> or no children, or was past her childbearing years, and yet owned property. She
> was a person, in other words, who lived outside the pattern of life expected of a

woman, in which her role and her assets were devoted to her family. And she was especially suspect if she was outspoken, not modest and quiet. A man or woman who was bitter, who was angry, who disrupted the harmony of daily life was the very image of a witch.[40]

We can simplify this to say that a witch, in the years of the Salem Witch Trials, was an outcast of society. This person was believed to practice witchcraft, black magic, or to possess intimate knowledge of the devil. In other words, this person was a literal kind of witch—the kind we associate with broomsticks, pointy hats, and nose warts. And the witch-hunt that took place in Salem was literal in its purpose: to hunt down and expose these witches, wherever and whomever they may be.

A modern-day witch-hunt, of course, updates these terms. This is where critical thinking begins. If the people of Salem were looking for actual witches, what would a modern-day witch-hunt look like? A modern-day witch-hunt is when panic goes too far, leading to a group of innocent people being targeted and persecuted. A modern-day witch, then, is still a societal outcast. We are no longer looking for actual witches. But we are still looking for those who fit outside a pattern. Our meaning has transformed from literal to figurative. We are more tolerant now, but no less prone to hysteria. (For our purposes, the term "modern-day" refers to events roughly in the last 50 to 75 years. The examples we will look at in class are much more recent—within the last 10 to 20 years.)

Vocabulary for graphic organizer (2-column notes):
Salem witch – an outcast of society; one believed to practice witchcraft (refer to previous list of evidence from *The Crucible*: conjuring spirits, ability to fly, stoppage of prayer, sending out spirit to torment someone)

Modern witch – an outcast of society; one (or a group of people) who is the target of

Salem witch-hunt – the measures taken by the people of Salem to find and expose witches living in the village

Modern witch-hunt – the measures taken by society to target, expose, and/or punish those who are different from the rest of the group or who pose a perceived threat to the rest of the group

Students will create a Venn diagram to see how these terms overlap (see Appendix 2).

Lesson #2

Working in assigned groups of three or four, students will be presented with examples of modern-day events that bear resemblance to the Salem Witch Trials. Using these examples, students will use our class set of laptops to create a PowerPoint or Prezi

presentation that details similarities and differences between these events and the outcomes of the Salem Witch Trials.

These examples will include: Jim Crow laws; the Holocaust; Japanese internment camps during WWII; the Red Scare; bullying by today's teens; and immigration reform. Each group will be presented with a topic and resource list (related article and/or website). Small-group structure is imperative in a high school setting. Students will be assigned to groups based on best-fit behavior and academic considerations. Because this lesson involves higher-level thinking, "high," "medium," and "low" groupings will be employed. Six topics (mentioned above) have been chosen to meet the needs of a typical 18-to-24-student class I might teach.

Each group will present its findings to the class, who will take notes as part of a jigsaw exercise. After all groups have presented, the class as a whole will have notes on each of the examples.

Lesson #3

With these terms now in mind, we will more closely examine characteristics of the Salem Witch Trials. This will give students an idea of what to look for in the examples of modern-day witch-hunts we see.

The essential question—*What would a modern-day witch-hunt look like if it happened today?*—is key to consider here. But how can we answer that if the original lessons of the Salem Witch Trials are not made clear? In discussions of this unit with our seminar leader, four characteristics emerged, the presence of which create the breeding ground for a modern-day witch-hunt.

A Perceived Threat

Fear begets more fear. Witch-hunts thrive on fear. A group has to feel threatened by *something*, and will use this fear as the logic behind its mission. In Salem, it was the presence of evil—specifically, witchcraft. Today, that threat may take any number of forms. (Student definition/what the students need to know: *A group feels threatened by some force, and will use this fear to drive its mission.*)

A Foreign Threat

Threats come from everywhere. In his book on conspiracy theories, *The United States of Paranoia*, Jesse Walker says there are five "primal myths that underlie American's conspiracy folklore": the Enemy Outside (plots from the outside), the Enemy Within (plots from within, where enemies disguise themselves as friends), the Enemy Above (an enemy "hiding at the top of the social pyramid"), the Enemy Below (an enemy lurking at

the bottom of that pyramid), and the Benevolent Conspiracy (those who are actually helping us, rather than working against).[41] The Salem foreign threat appears to be a blend of the Enemy Outside and the Enemy Within. Living in such a tight-knit and tightly controlled community, the people of Salem saw any divergence from the church as reason to suspect witchcraft. And witchcraft, with its leaning on spectral evidence— evidence produced by the accuser, unconfirmed by anyone else—was completely foreign in nature; "the devil is a wily one," Hale tells Proctor in *The Crucible*.[42] Elsewhere in the play, Tituba, a slave from Barbados, is an early and easy scapegoat because her appearance and habits are different. (Student definition: *A foreign threat is anything we don't already know or that makes us uncomfortable.*)

A Threat to Children

Children have long been the catalyst for hysteria. Our protective instincts kick in when children are at risk for, well, anything. Smaller, weaker physical stature, combined with adolescent naiveté, make children perfect, unsuspecting targets. Never mind that children are much more resilient and aware than we often give them credit for—once a threat is perceived, drastic measures will be taken to protect them. (Student definition: *Children are unsuspecting targets, and we feel the need to protect them at all costs*.)

Extreme Measures

Once these other characteristics have been established, it makes sense that acts of extreme measure might be taken in an effort to protect ourselves, our communities, our loved ones, etc. In the days of the Salem Witch Trials, these measures were indeed extreme: hangings for those who did not confess, ex-communication for those who did. At the very least, the accused suffer the emotional distress of being targeted and ostracized. Punishments tend to be of an all or none methodology: trying to rid Salem of every scrap and stitch of the devil is not too unlike our current efforts to rid the world of terrorists. Death or some form of execution also seems to be a theme: the hangings during the witch trials; the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust; the life-imprisonment sentences of two of the members of the West Memphis Three, a death sentence for the third. (Student definition: *Extreme measures are taken as a reaction to threats*.)

Lesson #4

With terminology and examples at their disposal, as well as an understanding of the events in *The Crucible*, students are now prepared to put their critical-thinking skills in action. With this third lesson, they will design a list of questions to ask when presented with an example of a modern-day witch-hunt. Students will be given two case studies— the West Memphis Three and racial profiling in the aftermath of 9/11—to examine. Each case study will consist of a set of resources that includes articles and web videos. It is important to note here that while students have previously seen examples of modern-day

witch-hunts (Red Scare et al), the case studies presented at this point will serve as the extended examples students will write about in their essay (below).

Taking the four previously discussed characteristics of a modern-day witch-hunt, students will read each of the two case studies with an assigned partner. They will each take notes on a graphic organizer as they work (see Appendix 2), in order to gather important details about each case. Once done, they will devise a set of three to four questions to be asked of each case. These responses will, and should, vary from pair to pair or even student to student. Sample student questions, taken from the West Memphis Three case, may include the following:

- What is the perceived threat to the community of West Memphis, Arkansas?
- What makes this a foreign threat?
- How are the children in West Memphis affected by this threat?
- What measures were taken against the WM3?

It is important to tell students that they are only coming up with questions at this point—not answering them. The process of teaching students to design questions—instead of find answers to them—is sometimes difficult, and truly involves critical thinking. To address this, we will practice designing questions using our previous examples (Red Scare et al). These questions should avoid fact-based queries that are easily accessible, and instead focus on behavior and rationale. Sample student questions may include the following:

- How did someone prove their innocence if he or she was accused of being a Communist, plotting against the United States, etc.?
- What did the support for the accused look like, and what efforts did these people make to stop the witch-hunt?
- Why might people *not* want to help or voice their support? What did they risk losing as a result?

Lesson #5

These previous lessons set up the assignment students will complete as part of this unit: an essay that details the answers to the questions above. Students, working individually now, will choose one of the two case studies and compose an essay on it. The format includes an introduction (summary of the case study chosen) and a paragraph that answers each of the three to four questions the student came up with from yesterday's work, followed by a conclusion that details a take-away "lesson" from the case.

For example, a lesson in the West Memphis Three case might be that appearances can be deceiving, or how important concrete evidence is when deciding a high-stakes trial. A

lesson of the racial-profiling case study might lie in its irony: efforts to preserve freedom can end up jeopardizing it. By this point, we have moved almost entirely away from *The Crucible* and Salem Witch Trials and are focusing our attention on its modern-day implications, while acknowledging that while history often repeats itself, it doesn't have to.

Appendix 1

Aligned to the Delaware Common Core State Standards under Reading: Literature

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1](#)
  Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3](#)
  Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.6](#)
  Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7](#)
  Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Aligned to the Delaware Common Core State Standards under Reading: Writing
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4](#)
  Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.5](#)
  Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

Appendix 2

2-Column Note-Taker (Lesson #2)

Salem witch	

Modern witch	
Salem witch-hunt	
Modern witch-hunt	

Venn Diagram for Similarities and Differences (Lesson #1)

Use this Venn diagram to compare and contrast two persons, places, things, or events. Add information about how they are the same in the middle of the diagram. Add information about how each is unique in the outside parts of the diagram.

Person, place, thing, or event #1   **Person, place, thing, or event #2**

BOTH
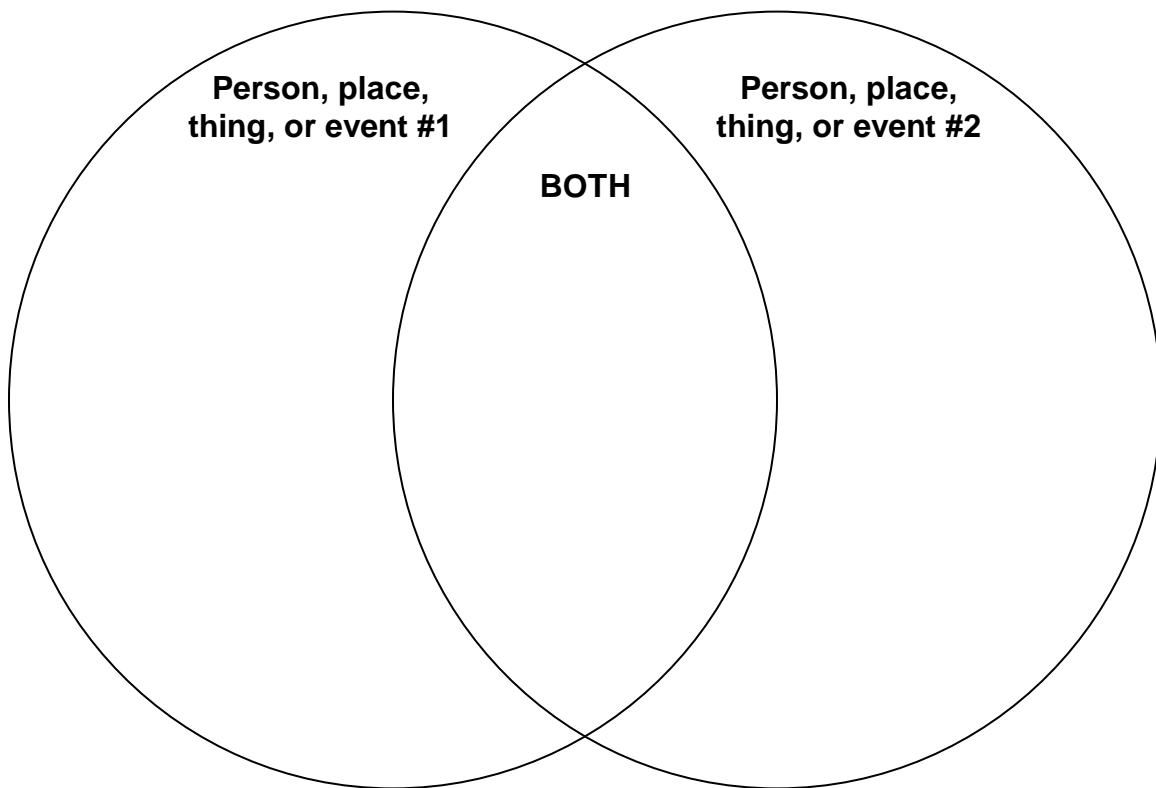
Characteristics of a Witch-Hunt Note-Taker (Lesson #2)

A perceived threat is…	
A foreign threat is…	
Children play into these threats because…	
Extreme measures are taken…	

Case Study Note-Taker (Lesson #3)

West Memphis Three	Racial Profiling in the Aftermath of 9/11
5 important details about the case: 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	**5 important details about the case:** 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

How is the WM3 case similar to the Salem Witch Trials? (2-3 ways) ➢ ➢ ➢	**How is racial profiling similar to the Salem Witch Trials?** ➢ ➢ ➢
How is the WM3 case different from the Salem Witch Trials? (2-3 ways) ➢ ➢ ➢	**How is racial profiling similar to the Salem Witch Trials?** ➢ ➢ ➢
3-5 Questions 6. 7. 8.	**3-5 Questions** 1. 2. 3.

9.	4.
10.	5.

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Curriculum Unit Title	A History of Fear	**Author**	Michael Pollock

KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.

History repeats itself if we don't learn from its lessons.
Fear and paranoia can lead to drastic measures.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT

How do authors and speakers address the issues that are important to them?

CONCEPT A	CONCEPT B	CONCEPT C

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A	ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B	ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C
How do today's definitions of "witch" and "witch-hunt" differ from those used during the Salem Witch Trials?	What are the characteristics of a witch-hunt?	What would the Salem Witch Trials look like if they happened today?

VOCABULARY A	VOCABULARY A	VOCABULARY A
witch Salem Witch Trials modern-day witch modern-day witch trial	perception of threat targets foreign threat threat to children extreme measures	West Memphis Three racial profiling

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