

Historiography Lesson Plan

Overview

Our understanding of historical events is always evolving. While this is in-part thanks to the use of new methodologies, technology, and the occasional lucky discovery, it is also the result of modern historians diligently working to eliminate inaccuracies that have become embedded in the retelling of past events. The story of the Salem witch trials is one particularly clear illustration of this phenomenon. As time went on and the story changed hands, certain details were exaggerated or distorted, resulting in significant mistakes in the popular narrative. In this lesson, students will be introduced to three different accounts of the Salem witch trials, two written by eye-witnesses and a third written over a hundred years later.

Objectives:

- Introduce students to the concept of historiography (the history of history).
- Enhance students' ability to critically analyze a historical narrative and distinguish fact from exaggeration.
- Further students' understanding of the Salem witchcraft trials.

Materials

- Either printed or digitally accessible copies of *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*, and *Salem Witchcraft* (PDFs provided)
- Printed copies of the Close Reading Chart

Warmup:

- Gather students into a large circle and have the group play the game “telephone.”
 - In this game, the first participant whispers a sentence into the ear of the person next to them. That person whispers the sentence they heard into the ear of the next person. This continues until the sentence has been shared around the circle. The sentence will almost always become distorted to some degree by the end of the activity.
- Discuss as a class:
 - 1) How this activity can show us the way a story can become distorted as it is transferred from one person to another
 - 2) How this phenomenon relates to the retelling of historical events.

Alternative Warm-Up

- Ask students to consider an experience they have had with gossip. Provide them with a fictional example such as:
 - Adam and Justine are on the same soccer team. One afternoon, Adam overhears Justine telling another friend he thinks their new coach is really tough. Later that afternoon, Adam tells Mark that Justine was complaining about their new coach. Mark then tells several other teammates that Justine hates their new coach. The next day, Justine is called into the coach's office, who by this point has heard he wants to quit the team.
- Either in small groups or as a class, discuss other examples (either real or fictional) where a story becomes altered or distorted through later retellings.
- Write on the board important questions to consider when assessing the accuracy of a story:
 - Can an eye-witness provide an inaccurate retelling?

- How does perspective alter the way an event is retold?
- At what point can we consider a story “100% true?”

Activity:

- Distribute copies of *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, *A Modest Enquire into the Nature of Witchcraft*, and *Salem Witchcraft*.
- Have students read each text, beginning with *A Modest Enquire into the Nature of Witchcraft*, followed by *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, and finally *Salem Witchcraft*.
- After reading each text, ask students to fill in the corresponding column of the Close Reading Chart.
- Either working independently or in small groups, ask students to compose a narrative of the beginning of the witch trials based on what they have read. Ask students to consider the details presented by each author and determine what they believe are facts and what are exaggerations.
- Come back together as a class and discuss the narratives created by the class. Why did they choose certain details and omit others? (For example, did they choose to include Upham’s theory about the circle of girls practicing divination? How do they describe the afflicted children?)

Optional Activity for Classes Reading *The Crucible*:

- Complete the above activity with the addition of Act I of *The Crucible* as the fourth and final source.
- Ask students to make a list of the details of Arthur Miller’s account of the children’s initial illness.
- Have students identify the similarities and differences between *The Crucible* and each of these sources. Which details changed and in what ways?
- Conclude by briefly discussing the influence of Arthur Miller’s retelling.
 - Though Miller was not the first to claim that Tituba was teaching a circle of young girl’s magic, he was the first to identify Tituba as black, rather than an Indigenous person. This interpretation of Tituba’s character is further dramatized in the 1996 film adaptation of this play.
 - Miller’s play was an instant success—it won a Tony Award for Best Play in 1953— and continues to be performed in theatres and read by high school students across the country to this day.
 - As a result, this interpretation of Tituba became a dominant feature of the narrative of the Salem witch trials throughout the remainder of the 20th century. It is only in recent decades historians and sites of public history (including the Salem Witch Museum!) have begun to address the need to remove this narrative entirely.

Close Reading Chart

	Robert Calef	John Hale	Charles Upham
How does the author describe the beginning of the witchcraft trials? What events do they identify as the start of the trouble?			
How does this author describe the afflicted girls (the people who were sick and claimed the illness was caused by bewitchment)?			
How does this author describe Tituba?			
What is the tone of this author? Does he sound skeptical, critical, or matter-or-fact, when describing these events?			