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Lessons from the Grimoire: The Legacy of the Salem Witch Trials through the Lens of Contemporary Fiction

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LESSONS FROM THE GRIMOIRE

The Legacy of the Salem Witch Trials through the Lens of Contemporary Fiction

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Master thesis North American Studies

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Introduction

When I visited Salem with my partner in October of 2022, the whole town was radiating with Halloween spirit. People in costumes ranging from horror characters like Freddy Krueger to Disney's Frozen cast could be found walking around the fair, watching the street artists and going into the witchy shops. In the midst of it all was a long line, waiting to walk past the stones of the Salem witch trials memorial, each dedicated to one victim. Many of the stones were covered in flowers, pennies and notes with quotes of the victims proclaiming their innocence with the caption "We are your voice!". What struck me most during our visit was not only how many people were drawn to this small town as a place to celebrate their favorite holiday, but how Salem's efforts to educate the public on its tragic history was melded with pop culture references and joyful celebration. Despite my initial doubts that the celebration of Halloween in this specific town would be disrespectful or tacky, it somehow all worked together perfectly. This got me thinking about how Salem has cemented itself in popular culture.

Though there are many recorded witch hysterias throughout European and American history, none have had such an impact on popular culture as the Salem witch trials. The event from February 1692 to May 1693 led to the execution of 20 individuals, making it the deadliest case of witch hysteria in American history. It is fascinating that such a small event of mass hysteria has remained one of the most recognizable ones in American culture. Compared to the tens of thousands of victims of the European witch trials, the victim count of the Salem trials does not seem to stand out. Even within the United States there are numerous cases of persecutions that have led to a higher death toll and rate of imprisonment than the Salem witch trials. Still, something seems to draw artists to Salem and its history. The trials have long been used to symbolize other instances of injustice and oppression. To this day, it seems that there is something about the witch trials that people can relate to.

There has been a lot of research done into Salem's history, ranging from trying to find a cause for the hysteria to discussing the commodified legacy of the trials. Popular media that feature Salem's history as a major plot point have been analyzed thoroughly as well. What seems to lack in the academic field is research into why it is specifically Salem that is so popular as a metaphor in these pieces of media, and what it is about Salem that makes it work in such a large variety of ways. In this thesis, the variety of metaphors and themes linked to the Salem witch trials will be explored, to hopefully uncover the answer to the following question: How does the portrayal of the Salem witch trials in contemporary fiction define the application of the metaphor of the witch hunt? I wish to argue that the trials represent the metaphor of the witch hunt particularly well through their political structure and efforts in both fiction and reality to reclaim the voice of the victims. From these pillars, a wide scope of Salem media can be established that covers an even wider range of contemporary issues that Salem can be linked to as a metaphor of the witch hunt.

Theoretically, this thesis will be rooted in the discipline of media studies. As this thesis will be comparing fictionalized events to real life events, methods from the discipline of history will also be employed to frame the context of these works, allowing for a deeper understanding of the meaning of Salem as a metaphor for witch hunts. The approach for this thesis will be a qualitative analysis, focusing on a few key case studies to answer the research question. To allow for an in-depth analysis, I have decided to focus on media between the end of the Second World War and now. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, to pinpoint why exactly the trials are relevant to current day society, it makes the most sense to analyze media created closely to current times. After all, most of the people alive today have grown up between the 1950s and now, with these media shaping their world view. Also, a novel written a short period after the trials is a lot more expected to reference them than one written nearly 400 years later. Because of that, the inclusion of the trials in modern media is a

lot more intentional, implying a deeper metaphor that the author is trying to hint at. This time period also allows for a greater diversity of types of media to cover. This thesis will incorporate plays, novels, tv shows, movies and music.

The main body of the thesis will divide the analysis of the two main categories of Salem media into two chapters. The first chapter approaches the idea of the Salem witch hunt as a metaphor for political persecution, and will argue that, in this instance, works about Salem highlight the hypocrisy found in modern societies who condemn the acts of the past while continuing to perform them themselves. Witch hunts have long been used as a metaphor for ostracism against certain social groups, particularly those with certain political ideologies. McCarthyism might be the most notable example of this, as people were made to fear any neighbor who might be a communist, leading to the social exile, arrests and even imprisonments of countless of innocent people after the second world war (Schrecker xii). However, the phenomenon has continued into the 21st century. After the September 11 attacks, the discussion of witch hunts was brought up again after people of Arabic descent were massively discriminated against as people feared them to be terrorists. The term witch hunt is often used to critique the concept of cancel culture, destroying people's reputation over something they have said or done. Former president Donald Trump has used the term many times to reference the criticism he has received for his statements and actions, even claiming that "more due process was afforded to those accused in the Salem Witch Trials". This chapter will explore this theme further, looking at how the Salem witch trials in particular have been used in media to reference modern day persecutions of certain social groups and offer criticism of this treatment. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* will be the main case study for this chapter. Lion Feuchtwanger's *The Devil in Boston* will support and expand on the themes found in *The Crucible*. Songs like Bloc Party's "Hunting for Witches" and

other media will also be discussed, covering a great area of the relevance of the Salem witch trials as a metaphor for a variety of modern witch hunts.

The second chapter will focus on the themes of justice and reclamation found in Salem media. The main argument of this chapter will be that focusing on portraying the trials from the perspective of the victims offers a sense of justice to those who have experienced their own witch hunts. At the same time, the highly fictionalized nature of much of Salem's media has created a protected community symbolized by the coven that viewers can be drawn into for a sense of security. These days, it is generally accepted and known that the victims of the trials were not real witches, and claims of the cause of the hysteria vary from medical afflictions to personal motives to frame someone (Mundra 540). While a lot of effort has been put into clearing the victims' names, the last reversal of a conviction being in May 2022 (Patel), their identities have taken on a whole new life in modern day media and culture. There has been a movement of not only fighting for the innocence of the victims, but to make their voices heard when they were not listened to in their times. Interestingly, the fact that the victims never chose to be involved with anything related to witchcraft is often left out of the conversation. It has not stopped pop culture from framing the victims as actual witches who were persecuted for their beliefs. All of this has led to a genre of characters who are either victims or descendants of victims of the witch trials, who avenge those who were wronged during the trials or create a community to protect themselves against the wrath of the outside world. Both of these interpretations of reclaiming power for those accused will be examined in detail in this chapter, focusing on the value of the Salem witch as the carrier of justice. *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* (André Øvredal 2016), *The Witch* (Robert Eggers 2015) and *American Horror Story: Coven* (Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk 2013) act as the key representations for this genre of Salem media. This chapter will also delve into the humorous aspect of modern witch media. With the witch being a popular Halloween costume, many movies, tv

shows and books ignore the context of the Salem witch trials entirely in favor of a more humorous, magical interpretation of the trials instead. Disney's *Hocus Pocus* (1993) is the prime example of this genre, and will be discussed in this chapter to prove how the value of the Salem witch has moved completely beyond the original events.

After closely examining key media that portray certain themes and tropes surrounding the Salem witch trials in the first two chapters to determine how the metaphor of the witch hunt is applied in Salem media, the third chapter will focus on finding patterns and similarities between the themes mentioned to uncover what it is about Salem specifically that draws people in, answering how Salem media define the metaphor of the witch hunt. For this, the focus will be placed on the most prominent examples from both chapters, *The Crucible* and *American Horror Story: Coven*. This comparative methodology will help uncover what aspects of the trials are appealing to not only artists and creators, but also for the audience and general public.

Sadly, limits in time, funding and resources mean that the earlier period of Salem media will not be explored in-depth in this thesis. The scope of media covering the Salem trials is simply too vast to portray within these limits, even within the time period that this work is focused on. This thesis nonetheless tells us a lot about the main sources of inspiration pulled from the Salem trials, with a focus on key media from the time period, illuminating the most compelling arguments as to how the trials are a powerful metaphor. I also dare say that this work will prove why it is important to continue teaching the progression of the trials to prevent and quell similar hysterias in the present and future through education.

Chapter 1: *The Crucible* and the hypocrisy of witch hunts

While the term witch hunt used to specifically refer to the persecution of people accused of witchcraft or making deals with the devil, the definition of the term has broadened since the European and North American witch trials ended. These days, when talking about a witch hunt, it is mostly used to describe a persecution of people for any kind of reason, often based on one's political or cultural identity. Witch hunts in this manner have existed all throughout history, from the persecution of Christians in the Roman empire to Nixon's use of the term in relation to investigations surrounding the Watergate affair (Paul). However, one of the most notable examples of a political witch hunt in American history, one that is referenced as often when discussing political witch hunts as the Salem trials, is the persecution of people accused of being communists after the second world war, known as McCarthyism. Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union rose tremendously after the second world war, their alliance quickly fading into distrust. The approach of senator Joseph McCarthy set the tone of how supporters of communism should be handled. In his 1950 speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, often referred to as the "Enemies from Within" speech, he outlined this approach. He made it clear to the public that supporters of the Soviet Union and communist ideals should be deemed antipatriotic and dangerous, and even the possibility of them infiltrating the American workforce will lead to the end of American freedom. The wording in this speech is very clearcut and direct:

He has lighted the spark which is resulting in a moral uprising and will end only when the whole sorry mess of twisted warped thinkers are swept from the national scene so that we may have a new birth of national honesty and decency in government.

Referring to those associated with the communist party as "twisted warped thinkers", McCarthy blames all issues of dishonesty and indecency on communist ideals. From there it is a slippery slope to accuse anyone who is critical of the American government, which could be

seen as an act of indecency, of being a communist. This line of thinking is what makes McCarthyism such a recognizable example of a modern witch hunt. Anyone accused of any indecent or immoral act will be labeled as someone that society fears at the time, in this case a communist. Comparisons between McCarthyism and the Salem trials are therefore imminent, as in Salem too anyone displaying any kind of suspicious behavior was labeled as someone feared by the community, a witch.

This comparison is what led Arthur Miller to write *The Crucible*, a play about the Salem witch trials that is an allegory for McCarthyism. Miller was inspired to write the play after Elia Kazan, a friend of Miller, testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee, or HUAC, outing eight people as communists (Polster 127). Disgusted by this action, Miller traveled to Salem to research the trials, leading to the creation of *The Crucible* as an allegory of the persecution of alleged communists. The play led to Miller becoming a person of interest for the HUAC. Miller's refusal to expose friends and colleagues with similar political activities as him resulted in his sentence of a fine, prison sentence, blacklisting and him not being allowed a US passport (Abbotson ix). A little over a year later, this conviction was overturned, ruling that the committee had misled Miller. The context of the production of the play shows how closely Miller was connected to the consequences of McCarthyism. In the time leading up to the creation and release of the play, he saw close friends and colleagues being suspected of communist activities, and felt the consequences of these convictions himself because he decided to speak up about the injustices. *The Crucible* is therefore not only relevant to the Salem witch trials as a metaphor in terms of its content, but also for its production and effect on its creator. If there is any piece of media that fully embodies the nature of McCarthyism, it is *The Crucible*. Without even looking at the contents of the play, its relevance is already evident.

The play is mostly follows the actual unfolding of events of the trials, though Miller made some changes to the story and characters. He is very open about these changes, calling them out in his note on the historical accuracy of the play. The victim Abigail Williams was aged up, while John Proctor was portrayed as much younger than he was in reality at the time (Miller, "Historical Accuracy"). Some of the participants in the trials have been merged into one or two characters to simplify the lineup of the play. Judges Hathorne and Danforth are symbols of all of the judges present at the trials. The fact that Miller calls these changes out explicitly makes it clear that he did not intend for *The Crucible* to simply be a retelling of historic events. In fact, it is important for him to note that not everything in the play is historically accurate. The events that are shown in the play do follow historic facts and tell the general story of how the Salem trials unfolded pretty well. Miller notes that despite the changes he made to make the play fit for theater, the horrific nature of the trials still comes across. This is essential, as Miller is trying to compare the horrors of the Salem trials to the McCarthyism trials. While the play can be used to understand the events of the Salem witch trials, it is not intended to teach historic events, but rather the lessons that can be learned from it. Since historic accuracy was not the focus of the play, editing minor details may have helped make the narrative more cohesive for stage. Simplifying the lineup of characters and omitting irrelevant details for the sake of the allegory makes it easier for the reader to focus on the analysis.

Miller's 1996 article "Why I wrote the Crucible" for the New Yorker offers a lot of insight into why Miller opted specifically for the Salem trials for his play. He states that researching the Salem trials reminded him a lot of the political witch hunts of the 1950s. From people ignoring their blacklisted friends to avoid being associated with them to people becoming incredibly patriotic to not come across as suspicious, people did anything to stay on the good side of the government. Rather than stand up to the corruption and injustices, people

decided to look away and do their best to not become a victim themselves. Miller also notes this experience as one that returns throughout history:

Apparently, certain processes are universal. When Gentiles in Hitler's Germany, for example, saw their Jewish neighbors being trucked off, or rs [sic] in Soviet Ukraine saw the Kulaks sing before their eyes, the common reaction, even among those unsympathetic to Nazism or Communism, was quite naturally to turn away in fear of being identified with the condemned. As I learned from non-Jewish refugees, however there was often a despairing pity mixed with "Well, they must have done something." Few of us can easily surrender our belief that society must somehow make sense. The thought that the state has lost its mind and is punishing so many innocent people is intolerable. And so the evidence has to be internally denied.

During the Salem trials, even though many may not have agreed with them, few would dare to speak up about the injustices in fear of being accused of witchcraft themselves. Especially since not much evidence was needed to convict someone for witchcraft, being too bold could easily lead to a death or prison sentence. It is therefore easier to look away and do one's best to not get convicted themselves. In *The Crucible*, this fear of speaking out is also present. When Reverend Hale visits John and Elizabeth Proctor in their house "to put some questions as to the Christian character of this house" (Miller, *The Crucible* 64), they are nervous to answer his questions. Knowing Elizabeth's name was mentioned in court, any misstep could lead to her accusation. Nervous that she will be accused even after answering the questions, Elizabeth urges her husband to tell Hale what they heard about the innocence of the girls accused. It is clear that John is nervous to do so, and when he does both of them are questioned for even believing in witches. The entire scene is very tense. Both Elizabeth and John know that all of their words will be closely examined. Even Hale seems hesitant about the guiltiness of those accused, especially when John points out that if they did not confess,

the accused would be hanged for denying. Still, Hale is not able to fight back against the accusations aimed at Elizabeth in this scene, instead recommending the couple to baptize their child and go to Sabbath prayer each Sunday to deflect the accusations. Even though he might not be fully convinced in this scene that the trials are fair, he would rather remain silent and complicit than be suspected himself.

A striking theme in *The Crucible* is that of society versus the individual. It is a theme that works well for both the original trials and the actions of the HUAC, creating a connection between the two in the play. The tension between the society and the individual returns throughout the storyline. Anna Kathryn Thompson analyses the careful balance between responsibilities on both sides in her thesis “Arthur Miller: The Individual and Society”. In this work, she lays out how John Proctor goes against society through his adultery, but society also mistreats him in return by giving him an unjust trial. Her conclusion is as follows:

Through this play, Miller shows that one’s responsibility to society is absolute and not to be side-stepped. Through the witch trials, Miller portrays society at its worst-- shirking its responsibility to its citizens by descending into a policy of persecution. His message is that a society that betrays its members must be defied. Such defiance is difficult, but it is the only way one can preserve one’s integrity. (Thompson)

This comparison also works with Hale’s situation, and adds onto why he can be considered a villain in this story. Aside from the fact that he is part of those who go around to convict people for witchcraft, he also fails to preserve his own integrity by continuing the interrogations when he has doubts about their rightfulness.

The act of preserving one’s integrity is a message that hits close to Miller’s own circumstances, which is part of the reason why *The Crucible* works so well as an allegory to McCarthyism. Miller noticed the injustices around him and decided to stand up against them, knowing that he would face consequences for doing so. This he certainly did, receiving harsh

penalties from the HUAC and becoming an outcast in his industry. Still, he chose to write and produce this play, knowing that at that time it would be considered betrayal to his own society, to speak out about what he saw going on around him. This layers the theme of society versus the individual from the original trials, through the play up to McCarthyism and Miller's own experience with it.

The theme of the tension between society and the individual goes deeper by also considering the nature of the sins committed by Proctor in *The Crucible*. Adultery is a private issue, that in the play is dealt with very harshly by the town. Even worse, throughout the play both John and Elizabeth are pressured to expose information on the other to be able to convict them of their supposed crimes. This invasion of the society into the private lives is something that Noorbakhsh Hooti has noted in his research paper "The quest for identity in Arthur Miller's 'The crucible':

It is also to be noted that in "The Crucible", Miller has tried to balance the personal and the social. Proctor commits a sin, the sin of adultery, for which he must be punished; however, the punishment of one's sins is not the only concern of Miller in the play. He has provided a different emphasis on the situation. One of the aims of the playwright is to present Proctor as a victim of public authority, which has invaded into the private lives of individuals. Proctor's sin of adultery was a personal error, which was dragged into a public domain. (Hooti 69)

Without a doubt this describes very closely what Miller is trying to say about the issue of the persecution of supposed communists in America. One's political ideals are a private matter that, as long as they are not expressed in a manner that is harmful to others, has no reason to be made a public issue. Even more so, the HUAC's actions had consequences on people's basic rights, like owning a passport. Making a huge public issue out of a private

matter in *The Crucible*, which is very clearly meant to criticize McCarthyism, exposes the same hypocrisy in contemporary society.

A criticism that Miller faced when his play opened was that witches were not real, and none of the convicted in the Salem trials were actual witches, but communists were certainly real (Miller, "Why I wrote *The Crucible*"). To those in the seventeenth century, the existence of witches was considered self-evident. Witches were as real as blacksmiths and bakers. The threat of witchcraft was therefore taken as seriously as any other crime. Even politicians and lawyers found it vital to combat witchcraft because to them it was a serious threat to their communities. Looking back at the McCarthyism era, it is clear that many of those accused and ostracized had little to nothing to do with actual communism. While communism may be a very real ideology, and the accusations in a sense might be more based on reality than the accusations of witchcraft, the fear of communism in the late 1940s and 1950s was not based on rationality. Americans were made to fear anything that could threaten their sense of freedom, and communism was made the pinnacle of that. While some that were accused of communist ideologies were actually part of the communist party, many were ostracized simply for criticizing the US government or its practices, including McCarthyism itself. They may not even have agreed with anything related to communist ideologies, but the fear of a red invasion meant that anything that could threaten the foundation of American society was deemed communism. In that sense, the communism that many were frightened of in the 1950s was no more real than the witchcraft in the 17th century. Just like the fear of communism, the fear of witchcraft was rooted in other concepts. Tituba, the first person accused of witchcraft during the Salem trials, most likely had been performing acts that the community around her may have interpreted as witchcraft. Though her exact origins are still unknown, it is suspected that she was a member of an indigenous tribe in South America or Barbados. Because of this, she had learned a lot of practices that she would later be accused of as being witchcraft. She

had spoken about talking to the devil and making a witch cake to help Elizabeth Parris, a sick child in the village (Nicholson 2). Though being so open about her experiences with witchcraft may have saved her life, an interview with Robert Calef reveals that Tituba may have been beaten and forced to confess by Samuel Parris (Calef). It is therefore reasonable to believe that she did not actually practice witchcraft. Many of the rituals she was thought to have seen perform were most likely rooted in her indigenous practices. It makes sense that many residents of Salem were cautious of indigenous practices. Aside from the strict Puritan ideals that ruled the town, leaving little room for other religions, the trials occurred in a time of unrest between the Puritans and native Americans. The years prior saw multiple attacks of native Americans on Puritan settlements in the area, leading to a wave of refugees settling in and around Salem (Murrin 309). These people were understandably shaken up by these attacks. This unrest has been accredited as one of the suspected causes of the Salem witch hysteria, as stress about their own safety led villagers to become suspicious of anything that could harm their sense of safety. This too echoes the circumstances after the second world war.

So in the discussion of the Salem trials as a metaphor for the McCarthyism witch hunt in *The Crucible*, Salem works to define and expose the injustices in modern day witch hunts. In terms of the course of events, the nature of the allegations and the consequences for those persecuted, Salem makes for a perfect analogy for McCarthyism. The question that remains is what can be taught from this analogy. Simply stating that these two events of mass hysteria are similar is undermining the value that can be added by learning from the earlier event. Miller seems to heavily focus on showcasing the horror and absurdity of the accusations and trials, creating a warning for what may happen if people do not stand up to these injustices. The narrator emphasizes that what is happening in the play is also what is happening in the United States in their time.

There is another play about the trials as an analogy for McCarthyism that emphasizes this message of the injustices of modern witch hunts. Lion Feuchtwanger's 1948 play *Wahn oder Der Teufel in Boston* is very similar to Miller's play. Both showcase the events of the Salem witch trials mostly based on the real life course of events, with certain characters being fictional or dramatized. It may seem unnecessary therefore to mention this play. However, something that makes Feuchtwanger's perspective unique is that he himself had gone through another major witch hunt. As a Jewish novelist and playwright in 1930s Germany, he was forced to flee his country after losing his citizenship for his works criticizing the Nazi regime, settling in Sanary-sur-Mer in the south of France. When he was imprisoned when the Germans invaded France in 1939, he eventually managed to flee to the United States. There he was later also under suspicion for his support of the Stalin regime, mainly written about in his book *Moskau 1937*. Feuchtwanger's play is not as openly about McCarthyism as *The Crucible*. Waltraud Maierhofer argues in his essay "Another Play on Salem Witch Trials': Lion Feuchtwanger, Communists, and Nazis" that this play is actually about Feuchtwanger's message to the next generation in Germany, signaling his return in spirit to Germany (357). Especially for post-war Germany, a message of hope of recovery from mass hysteria is one desperately needed. As Maierhofer explains:

The play also shows the resurgence of superstition and mass mania as short-lived and being overcome by reason. This optimistic aspect was particularly important for the play's subsequent performances and publication in post-fascist Germany, which silently welcomed its concluding optimistic message about forgetting and a new beginning (371).

The Devil in Boston shows that it is possible as a society to move on from a moment of hysteria. Just as how the Salem trials were soon considered a massive mistake, Germany also has the ability to bounce back and learn from this moment of mass hysteria. Though the

consequences of Germany's mass hysteria are significantly greater than that of the Salem trials, it could be said that they are making sure that something like it would never happen again, focusing on education and banning any Nazi symbolism. Feuchtwanger's work offers hope to those caught in a witch hunt that there is an end in sight and that a society can heal from it.

This lesson, especially considering Feuchtwanger's own experience with McCarthyism in the United States, is also applicable to the situation that Miller is trying to outline in *The Crucible*. Despite the horrors of a political witch hunt, it is possible as a society to recover from it. This is made clear by the fact that *The Crucible* has been adapted into a Hollywood movie produced by a major studio, starring famous actors like Daniel Day-Lewis and Winona Ryder. Miller has spoken on his disbelief of the movie adaptation of *The Crucible*, given that at the time Hollywood was one of the industries blacklisting anyone associated with communism or criticizing the government (Miller, "Why I Wrote the Crucible"). Only a few decades later, they produce and release a movie criticizing exactly what they were doing at that time. The movie even went on to be nominated for major awards by esteemed associations. It is fascinating that in such a short period of time, a society managed to completely turn their views around, and even admits to their wrongdoings. By releasing this movie, the producers side with Miller, when at the time he was outcasted by the same institutions that now released and praised this movie.

While the term witch hunt may have evolved into a whole new abstract definition, hunts similar to the Salem witch trials are still rampant today. Because of this, it remains vital to remember and learn from past witch hunts. Media like *The Crucible* and *The Devil in Boston* serve as a reminder of what can happen if these hysterias are let out of control. While it may be difficult to see in the moment, in hindsight the ridiculousness of the hysteria becomes clear, and it becomes acceptable to discuss the wrongdoings of that time. During the

Salem trials, speaking up about the injustices meant risking becoming a target or getting persecuted for supporting supposed witches. The same is true about McCarthyism, with people cutting ties with anyone potentially linked to communism in fear that they themselves would also be deemed suspicious. Yet with both of these events, the mindset has completely switched. Within the decade that the Salem trials occurred, the community already started to realize that what happened was a moment of hysteria with major consequences for the victims. On January 14 1697, a fast day was held to repent for the Salem trials. Interestingly, the General Court referred to the trials as a “tragedy, raised among us by Satan and his Instruments” (Dawson 299). This is a complete turnaround from the idea that the alleged witches were led astray by Satan, the cause of the trials in the first place. Instead they fully admit that it was not the victims, but the persecutors that were led astray.

The lesson of the danger of political hysteria is one that carries through to more recent events. After the September 11 attacks, discrimination against people of Arabic descent skyrocketed. This discrimination ranges from extra suspicion at airport security to severe violent attacks. The singling out of individuals suspected of terrorist motives was usually not based on their actual acts or words, but rather their appearance, name or religion. Many chose to remove religious attires to appear more approachable, which was the case for many hijab wearing women (Kwan 765). Even those who do not identify as Muslims were targeted. Many Sikh men chose to remove their turbans and cut their hair to appear less threatening to other American citizens, even if these visual markers had nothing to do with Islam (Ahluwalia).

Even if these choices in appearance were in no way meant to imply harmful motives, many interpreted them as such. The harmful stereotypes of Muslims as violent and antidemocratic have been encouraged by media and scholars that focus purely on these negative aspects, failing to provide any nuance to give the full scope of Islamic cultures (El-

Aswad 43). The reduction of the diverse and broad Islamic and Arab cultures into this single narrow idea of a “culture of death” in these media gets picked up on and echoed by those that consume it. Especially after an event as traumatic as the September 11 attacks, people needed the comfort of knowing who the “bad guy” was and the media provided that for them.

However, after some time had passed and people had a chance to work through the trauma of 9/11, some began to criticize the accusatory behavior of the media and government and the effect that it had on thousands of innocent lives. While at the time many genuinely believed that they were pursuing those who threatened the freedom in America by invading Afghanistan, more and more people have started seeing through the manipulations of the government to justify that invasion.

The unfolding of events after 9/11 mirrors the Salem witch hysteria, with people being accused based on fear and little actual evidence of any wrongdoing. Though it is too soon after the September 11 attacks to fully encapsulate their legacy, seeing as how most people who witnessed them are still alive today and may be influenced by their own traumas, criticism of the treatment of Muslims has grown in recent years and the fear of Muslims as terrorists seems to have subsided a little as new events have shifted the focus from them onto other groups. For example, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, hate crimes against people of Asian descent skyrocketed as they unjustly were blamed for spreading the disease (Tessler).

British rock band Bloc Party’s 2007 song “Hunting for Witches” is centered around the fear that the media perpetrates. The lyrics of the song focus on the media coverage after the London bombings and 9/11, comparing the framing of certain groups of people as the enemy to witch hunts. They also focus heavily on the risks of criticizing witch hunts:

Kill your middle class indecision

Now is not the time for liberal thought

It is known that in times of crisis, people tend to lean more conservative in their voting behavior and political ideas. Anyone critical of the leaders' approach to retaliate against those that harmed their country is accused of supporting them, similar to how Miller explained this in his 1996 article. This was certainly the case in Salem too, with people being afraid to speak up against the injustices in fear of being accused themselves. Any criticism is deemed "liberal thought", and it is not until after a hysteria dies down that people are able to discuss it rationally. Until then, the framing of media takes the focus away from the actual issue in favor of a simple narrative that can quell people's fears at the cost of others' safety:

The Daily Mail says "the enemy's among us

Taking our women and taking our jobs"

All reasonable thought is being drowned out

By the non-stop baying, baying, baying for blood

This verse shows how fear and paranoia can take over all reasonable thought, leading to persecutions of anyone in the hopes that it might alleviate the anxieties of a society.

However, it is also made clear that these persecutions are irrational, praying on common fears to justify the discriminations. This verse also portrays the idea of the enemy hiding themselves in a society to ruin it from the inside. This is a concept that echoes throughout all of these witch hunts, as people are made to believe that anyone can be a witch.

Once again, the Salem trials can prove to be an important lesson in the dangers of mass hysteria. While the rise of mass media and the internet have changed the landscape of news significantly since the 17th century, the general power structures and the cause and consequence of hysteria remain similar. If it is possible for a society to look back on a hysteria with regret, it might also be possible for it to recognize the patterns and stop a hysteria before it becomes fatal.

Chapter 2: Anger, empowerment and community

While the lessons of the Salem witch trials are often focused on the larger political consequences of mass hysteria and discrimination, in part due to famous works of media such as *The Crucible* that use the trials as an allegory of political persecutions, there is a lot to be said about the social legacy of the trials as well. Since those accused often had little chance to defend themselves, they have become icons for those in modern society who feel the same way. The relatability has turned the scorned witch into a character trope. The use of this trope is often far removed from the actual events of the Salem trials. To explain how the story of the Salem trials have been shaped into something so different from the actual events, it is important to look at the evolution of the witch trope. While the history of the witch trope is incredibly complex and extensive, Diane Purkiss argues in her book “The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations” that the representation of the witch as an unwed, independent woman whose threat to the patriarchal power justifies her persecution is a relatively modern idea (8). Most people persecuted during witch hunts did not fit this image, many being married with children or otherwise being respected members of their societies. Rather, this witch trope has evolved from feminist narratives, reflecting back on history with a modern view. As Purkiss explains:

The figure of the witch has been central to the revival of women’s history over the past two decades. That revival has been carried out by academic historians, but not only by them; the original impetus behind the attempt to uncover women’s past came from activists in the women’s liberation movement, and partly from the fact that witches were among the few women given any space whatever in pre-feminist history (9).

The scorned witch has therefore become a popular trope in modern media, especially those created through a feminist lens, reflecting a deeper meaning of social injustice. The trope has merged with the story of the Salem trials to create a new identity, one that has little

to do with the actual historical events but remains in the public consciousness as the new narrative of the trials. Those persecuted during the Salem trials had little to nothing in common with the modern witch trope. Even those who faithfully went to church, or those married to esteemed members of the community were suspected of making pacts with the devil. While the innocence of those accused is seen as self-evident, with even those who strongly believed in the witch craze at the time changing their opinions only months after the hysteria ended, this has not stopped the merging of the facts of the Salem witch hysteria with the broader trope of the scorned witch. This new narrative has taken on a life of its own in popular media. A major characteristic of this narrative is the response to the injustices of the Salem trials. This characteristic presents itself in a number of ways in Salem media, but this chapter will be focused on two main branches of it: anger and protection as a response to injustice. One is a revenge narrative, while the other seeks to establish a narrative where the victims are protected, either during or after the events. What these categories have in common is that they all allow for the creator to add their own elements of magic into the narrative, ranging from magical realism to full-blown fantasy tales. It is difficult to fully explore the range of how the Salem trials have been transformed in media without also mentioning the works that truly separate from the actual historic events of the Salem trials, fully embracing the magical quirkiness of the modern Halloween witch. In the discussion of why the Salem trials have remained an important metaphor in popular culture, it may seem irrelevant to discuss those works that fully transform the original events into something completely different. However, these works prove that Salem has moved beyond being a news header and has deeply ingrained itself as an element of American society, a concept more so than a single event in history. Works that incorporate this concept therefore showcase what the trials mean to the society, beyond simply being a moment of mass hysteria in the margins of history books. These examples of the social impact of the Salem trials in media showcase the core

ideas in the Salem trials that people can relate to. In most of the examples in this chapter, the victims of the Salem trials are portrayed as actual witches who perform pagan rituals, with varying levels of actual magic involved. While it is important to note that this is not accurate to real life, as there is no evidence that the victims of the trials were actually involved in any pagan rituals, it seems unnecessary to point out this fact for every example. Therefore, the discussion of the interpretation of the Salem trials in these pieces of media will include the magical and pagan elements as fictional fact, acknowledging that, while historically inaccurate, these elements have become part of the modern Salem narrative.

The trope of the witch as a scornful woman who kidnaps children for her own spiritual or aesthetic gain has created an image of witches as immoral and evil. In modern Salem media, this trope tends to present itself as a victim seeking revenge for the injustices she faced by harming anyone from descendants of her wrongdoers to whoever gets in her way. *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* is a prime example of the trope of the revenge-seeking witch. Two coroners examine the body of an unidentified young woman, who was found at the scene of multiple homicides. The damage on the body is strange and inexplicable, with no visible external trauma aside from broken wrists and ankles. The woman's tongue has been cut out and her lungs are charred. Inside her stomach, the coroners find a cloth with Roman numerals and markings on it. They later discover that the markings refer to a bible verse that condemns the practice of divination and soothsaying. The year 1693 is also on the cloth, making it clear that the woman is a victim of the Salem trials. They realize that, while the woman appears dead, she is immortal and can feel all the pain done to her. The only way to end her curse is by afflicting the same wounds she has on someone else, thereby healing her own wounds. For this reason she haunts and tortures the two coroners throughout the movie, leading to both of their deaths by the end of it. The closing scene, in which the corpse is discovered by police

and taken to Virginia Commonwealth University, implies that the curse has not been lifted as her big toe twitches.

What gives this movie depth and what separates it from other, more shallow interpretations of this trope, is that it is revealed that the witch has to harm others in the way that she has been harmed in order to restore her own body. This evokes sympathy from the main characters as it is clear that she has little choice but to do the things she does in order to stop her own pain. It even leads to one of the coroners choosing to sacrifice himself to Jane Doe to stop her, though it does not work and the other coroner also dies in the end, while the curse still has not been broken. Despite the fact that Jane Doe does not move at all throughout the movie, there is a lot of depth to her character, especially through the lens of seeking justice through anger. It is clear that she is trying to get her justice, willing to do whatever it takes to get it, but the viewer will never know how she truly felt about the things she had to do. Even through her anger and fight for justice, she is not able to let her voice be heard or to even show emotions on her face. She is automatically assumed to have evil intentions, even though she might simply do it out of desperation. Once again she becomes the victim of a witch hunt, which she ultimately wins, though it is unclear what will happen to her after the events of the movie. With all of these elements, the justice in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* is complex. While she seems to remain cursed for an indefinite amount of time, keeping her a victim of a witch hunt and never truly getting to the point of getting justice, it is clear that she is going to do everything in her power to fight back against the curse.

Another great example of the scorned witch is that of Robert Eggers' *The Witch*. Set in 17th century New England, this movie follows the young girl Thomasin and her family as they are cursed by different tragedies. Thomasin is blamed for these tragedies, being accused of witchcraft and making a deal with the devil. The family ignores her cries that it is the family's goat Black Philip, who she believes to be Lucifer, that is causing the chaos. After the rest of

the family dies throughout all of the hysteria, Thomasin follows Black Philip into the goat house, where he turns into a man and offers her a life of luxury. She accepts, signing her name in his book and following him into the forest, where she is met by a coven, joining their ritual.

So why is this image of the angry Salem witch so popular in modern media? The reasons for the witch's anger certainly seems justified, as her voice was taken from her and she was brutally punished for things that she did not do. When rationally discussing the accusations or desperately pleading for your innocence does not work, anger and revenge seem like the only option. In these media, the witch is often given a second chance to fight for her justice, usually by implementing some form of immortality, and she will use this opportunity to make those that harmed her feel the same way that she did. Whether or not this tactic of finding justice is immoral is not a discussion for this thesis, however the ethics of it do mirror issues found in current day society that make this approach to the Salem trials very relevant. The revenge-seeking witch can easily be related to the angry feminist archetype. As Helen Aadnesgaard explains in her essay "The Angry Feminist":

If feminist women do not conform to ladylike behaviour, outside of feminist spaces, we are generally snubbed and rejected, and when feminist women step outside prescribed feminine behaviour, we are given our own label with all the layers it brings with it. We are inevitably called The Angry Feminist (84).

The angry feminist does not seek to follow the traditional expectations put upon them by society. They are not afraid to speak up about the injustices and inequalities they and others face, which is often interpreted as them being man-hating, fun-hating individuals. This is definitely an oversimplified conclusion, as most of these individuals simply wish to live their lives as they want to without harming others, but in order to do so they have to allow themselves to take up the space to defend themselves. The rejection of societal expectations makes the angry feminist a pariah, often stereotyped in ways that society deems immoral. As

Aadnesgaard puts it, “a vocally assertive woman who is a feminist, a woman with an opinion, is one of the scariest things a patriarchal society can imagine” (85). With this line of reasoning it makes sense that the witch as an assertive revenge-seeking woman is a popular character for horror and thriller movies. Especially in Puritan New England settings, women were expected to be submissive, obedient and kind caregivers to their children and spouses. Take those elements away, she becomes a witch. Give her a voice and a chance to defend herself, she becomes a nightmare. In this sense, the scorned witch reflects both the reality and the assumptions about the angry feminist. The realistic side is that of the witch wanting to reclaim her power and voice, standing up to the injustices put upon her and exposing those who wronged her. However, the scorned witch is often exaggerated, just like the stereotypical portrayal of the angry feminist. She does not just want to reclaim her early life or gain an equal position to the men in her life, she wants to become more powerful than she ever was before. She will destroy anyone who gets in her way, usually men as they represent those that harmed her, to become the most powerful being imaginable. *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* follows this pattern, with the Salem witch causing numerous deaths of innocent people who are just doing their jobs.

What *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* and *The Witch* have in common is that in both of these movies, the witch starts out as an innocent woman who is blamed for the tragedies that befall her community. The exact origin story of Jane Doe is unclear, but it is known that what she suffered through after being accused is what caused her to become immortal and cursed. In *The Witch*, Thomasin makes a deal with the devil after the entire family turns against her. Both of these women were not listened to by the community around them, which lead them to join the devil’s side and turn into a witch. They were only trying to protect themselves from the hatred of their community, to no avail, with the only outcome being to join the side that they were accused of being on anyway, as there was no way for them to be accepted by their

own community. In this sense, Thomasin and Jane Doe represent the real victims of the Salem trials more closely than originally presented. Though both of these movies are in the horror genre, intended to entertain and scare their viewers, they manage to express the desperation and anger of the people who were not able to defend themselves during the Salem witch hysteria. They can be seen as a warning to the audience of what may happen when the cries of the innocent are ignored. While in real life the threat of someone turning to witchcraft would not be seen as an issue anymore by the vast majority of western society, victimization, whether real or only perceived, has been shown to lead to extremism. This can be brought out of the sphere of just the angry feminist trope into a whole world of radicalism and extremism in all corners of society. Mitch Berbier unpacks this idea specifically in relation to white supremacy in his article "Victim Ideology of White Supremacists & Separatists in the United States". He claims that the positioning of white men as victims in society is a recruitment method for white supremacist groups especially aimed towards a younger audience who feels excluded in modern day social justice:

Whatever its merits or absurdities, the notion that Whites are victims of oppression at the hands of a nonwhite left-wing cabal can be very attractive to young Whites – perhaps especially to young white males who also see themselves as victimized by "radical feminism," who do not possess the elementary historical or sociological knowledge to recognize the implications of an historically privileged position, and who (at least among the middle- and upper-class Whites) have been specifically trained not to see how their advantaged upbringing might relate to their success in life (188).

The devil in this instance lies in the ones seducing vulnerable people into extremism, pointing out the perceived victimization that they are facing. While the focus of the discussion surrounding social injustices should not be focused on the perceived threats of the majority,

this example does work to show the real life implications of the issue that the scorned Salem witch stands for as a metaphor.

The isolationist element of the scorned witch is one that returns in the other branch of the witch trope that is popular within Salem media, the protection of the victims. As shown by the upcoming examples, this branch is centered around the idea of a closed off community specifically for the witches that managed to escape persecution in Salem. These closed off communities allow the witches to practice their magic openly and hone their skills. The idea of a closed off community for witches specifically is common in all kinds of witch media, even outside of Salem, from *Harry Potter* to the Japanese anime *Little Witch Academia*. What highlights the stories set around the victims of the Salem trials is the puritan background that frames the protection narrative. The strict community that disallows anything that is deemed abnormal or immoral makes for an incredibly appealing contrast with the usually more accepting and tolerant coven. This also forms an inherent distinction between good and evil, and offers a natural enemy for the witches to fight against.

American Horror Story: Coven is an especially great example of this trope specifically about the victims of the Salem trials. In this series' stand-alone season, the plot is focused around Zoe Benson, who discovers that she is a descendant of a Salem witch after her boyfriend dies a violent death the first time they have sex, uncovering her hidden power. Fearing for her safety, her parents send her to a private school in New Orleans where young witches are taught how to be safe and strong in the modern world. Immediately there is a clear protected, stand-alone community, the small coven led by the owner of the school. There is also a marker that sets the girls apart from the rest of the world, each girl having a different power. This marker means that they are unsafe in the outside world, but within their own community they will have support and be protected by the others. The way this is made clear in the first episode immediately shows both the power of this trope and its relatability to real

life. Zoe attends a party with fellow coven member Madison, where the latter gets drugged and gangraped by a fraternity. When they try to escape the crime scene, Madison flips the bus using her powers, killing most of the boys. Zoe later goes to the hospital to rape one of the survivors to kill him off too for what he did to Madison. As brutal as this plotline is, it goes to show the power of the community that Zoe and Madison find themselves in. For real life victims of sexual assault, having a supportive community around them can make a huge difference in processing their trauma. Having this recognition of the injustices on screen as well helps destigmatize the subject and encourage victims to not feel ashamed or guilty of what happened to them.

The idea of *American Horror Story: Coven* as a feminist safe haven is supported by Meg Lonergan's article "Witches, Bitches and White Feminism: A Critical Analysis of *American Horror Story: Coven*". In the article, Lonergan argues that the witches in *Coven* represent a variety of underrepresented and marginalized communities. For example, she names the witch Nan, played by Jamie Brewer, as a representation of feminist disability studies (5). While it is never explicitly mentioned in the show, Brewer has Down syndrome. However, this aspect of her is not the focus of her character. Instead, she is fleshed out through her clairvoyant abilities and how she has to deal with them both as assets and as obstacles. The fact that the coven is quite diverse means that in the show, the witches are not singled out for their differences, but rather united through their shared magical background. This way it still conveys the struggle of being accepted by the majority without falling back on stereotypes or overused tropes.

Coven certainly is not perfect in its ability to be a safe haven for everyone. As Lonergan points out, race is an incredibly complex subject in the show, and the relationship between racist socialite Delphine and black witch Queenie both shows the ability for ignorant racists to learn and grow and perpetuates the idea that it is up to marginalized groups to

educate those racists about their problematic ideals (6). Still, the show works to empower marginalized groups through its use of the Salem witch. All of the witches in the show's titular coven have some connection to the original witches of Salem. This connection is always portrayed as a source of power, which stems from the fact that the Salem witches managed to evade persecution and escape to New Orleans, while other non-witches were accused and convicted in their place. By doing so the show establishes the Salem witch as a powerful woman that goes against society's expectations to live their own authentic life. This narrative is obviously quite different from those actually accused of witchcraft during the Salem witch hysteria. In this instance, this transformation is justified through its amplification of the show's feminist message. As Lonergan argues:

Feminists, like witches, remain unpopular speakers of truth to oppressive powers and patriarchy. Although some popular feminists may find acceptance and praise from the general public, most will carry on the fight for social justice while being marginalized and discredited. While Semprich criticizes second wave feminism for inventing and creating mythical stories about witchcraft and witches (Semprich 2004, 113), I argue that these stories exemplify playing with history and a construction of a feminist mythos that is not different than other patriarchal constructed narratives (such as Hobbes' state of nature or Locke's signing of the social contract). (9)

This explains how Salem's story can be changed to suit these feminist narratives. However, certainly not all Salem media changes the narrative of the trials to emphasize some form of social commentary the way the scorned witch or the protected society tropes do. While both the scorned witch and the protected community trope have a focus on finding justice for the victims of the Salem trials, there is one more category that has taken on the magical elements added to the Salem story as a focus of its storyline. This category is not focused on the political or social associations with the trials, but rather focuses purely on the entertainment

aspect, transforming the characters of the trials into comical and stereotypical beings that bear little to no resemblance to the real life events. This genre of Salem fiction does not actively try to provoke any critical thought towards the events of the trials, and actually tries to steer the consumer away from thinking too much about the horrors of the trials. Still, its existence is a very telling example of how the trials have been transformed by time. In today's age, there are few people who can trace their lineage far enough back to know that they were in any way related to any of the participants of the trials, and few people still feel emotional towards the events. While most can still recognize the atrocities when given the facts, it is possible to discuss the trials without much emotional attachment. Media like Disney's 1993 movie *Hocus Pocus* and cartoonish Halloween costumes can exist without any backlash for fetishizing the atrocities of the Salem trials, because almost no one associates these things with the actual trials. This process from horrific event to cultural phenomenon is what Caitlin Doughty refers in her article of the same title as "from witch to kitsch". The idea she lays out is that there is a certain length of time after a traumatic event that it takes for such an event to become camp. The way society talks about witch trials would be completely unacceptable if the topic concerned the September 11 attacks or the Holocaust. However, the sinking of the Titanic, just a little over a century ago, has been turned into a musical and dramatic romance Hollywood movie with critical acclaim, to the point where many will think of Jack and Rose when seeing the ship's name before thinking about the actual tragedy. After a certain amount of time, all personal connection to an event gets lost and it becomes acceptable for that event to be used in any context, from dramatic romances to comedies. The Salem trials have definitely gone through this process, so all iterations of the trials have become acceptable to the general public. While this process greatly reduces the impact of the horrific event, it does allow a whole new world of interpretation to be opened up. In this sense, the meaning of the Salem trials has completely expanded. Rather than being a lesson from the past, the Salem

trials have become a legendary tale, similar to that of King Arthur and the Trojan War. The trials have taken on a life of their own, with variations of the story being created in every new iteration. This means that the lessons derived from the trials have also expanded, with the ability to add any kind of meaning to the trials. While some writers decide to focus on retelling the story from the point of view of the victim, adding in elements of revenge or justice that lacked in the original outcome of the trials, others find meaning far away from the original course of events. *Hocus Pocus* has a definite focus on the importance of sisterhood and family. All three sisters are necessary for the execution of their wicked plans. Even if they do not add any meaningful skill to their operation, the three find value and comfort in the mere presence of the others. The value of this bond is confirmed at the end of *Hocus Pocus 2*, when Winifred decides to cast the *Magicae Maxima* spell to defeat the protagonists. In her obsession with power she fails to heed the warning that this spell takes away the thing that the caster cherishes most, and watches in horror as her sisters fade away. In the end, she chooses to be reunited with her sisters over winning the battle. While the original trials did not involve any real witches or covens, the cultural legend of the Salem trials allows for this kind of meaning to evolve. In doing so, the Salem witch hunt as a metaphor has expanded from persecutions and inequalities to values of sisterhood, community and protection.

Even modern day Salem itself has undergone this transformation. While there is a lot of focus on teaching the history of the town and the trials, including museums and memorials, the trials have become a major tourist attraction, leading to a lot of unrelated witch and Halloween themed activities. While none of these things are actually related to the events of the trials, the town has reclaimed the taboo of witchcraft and turned it into its main selling point. In a way, this does refer back to the idea of healing from a major hysteria, as the ideals of the town have completely turned around and it is now known as an incredibly progressive and accepting town, boasting the community and protection that Salem now represents.

Chapter 3: How Salem connects it all

With all of these types of media referencing the Salem trials in such a variety of ways, there is a lot to discuss in terms of the value of the trials as a metaphor in modern day society, and how it has remained in the public consciousness for such a long period of time. In this chapter the differences of the pieces of media will be examined, as well as the similarities between them to see how the creators have utilized the Salem witch trials as a metaphor in these works. From each chapter one work will be used as a representation of its respective position in the debate to prove how everything works together. For the first chapter, this will be *The Crucible*, and for the second *American Horror Story: Coven*.

The main division of types of Salem media, one that this thesis also upholds, is that between the focus on the political and social persecution versus the reclamation of the narrative for the victims. While both of these perspectives use the trials as the base of their narratives, they focus on entirely different aspects and thus portray the trials completely differently. Media that focus on the political and social persecution work to uncover a general structure of power imbalance that leads to the ostracization of certain groups. In general, this perspective offers a more objective, factual representation of the trials, leaving people to draw their own connections between Salem and their current situation. In comparison, media that focus on finding justice for the victims are a lot more subjective, focusing on the experience and perspective of the victims rather than the overall situation.

For the metaphor of persecutions, Salem can be a way to condense a large system of oppression into a more easily understandable storyline. The real life situations that the Salem trials are a metaphor for are incredibly complex and deep-rooted in society, making it difficult to reveal its entire scale at one glance. While the story of Salem itself certainly carries much of the same complexity, the modern understanding of it has created a clearer, linear unfolding of events that is much more easily consumable. *The Crucible* shows how Salem can work to

reduce the scale of such a mass persecution to a more easily consumable size. McCarthyism was not a simple linear procedure. The effects of the fear of communism were felt in all aspects of society, from personal relationships to career opportunities and in some cases even legal punishments. The consequences of being accused during the McCarthyism era ranged from being cast out of social groups to losing one's job or passport, as was the case for Miller. Since the scope of the hysteria was so wide, it is difficult to fully encapsulate the impact that it had on American society at the time into one work of art. Miller, who had personal experience with the consequences of McCarthyism, socially, financially and politically, managed to fit a lot of this information into *The Crucible*. The political aspect is the clearest one, but he also goes on to show how the persecutions impacted people's personal relationships, with characters being suspicious of the actions of others, and the fear of persecution leading to people lying and in turn condemning others. Scaling the course of McCarthyism down to the small community of Salem creates an certain amount of overview that the hysteria was lacking, especially to the society at the time that did not have the historical perspective we do now, while at the same time keeping the relevant comparison between both of the events.

The approach of *American Horror Story: Coven* is similar to that of *The Crucible* in that they both scale down the events that they are based on. However, while *The Crucible* scales down McCarthyism to the size of one specific storyline of the Salem trials, in *American Horror Story* it is the trials themselves that are scaled down to focus specifically on the personality and legacy of the victims. In this instance, it is Salem that is the grand event, that is scaled down to an approachable size by following just a small selection of characters, rather than the entire events. This allows for a deeper understanding of the characters outside of their roles in the Salem trials, and offers more character development than stories that focus mostly on the trials themselves.

From this division between the focus on political persecution and the focus on empowering the victims, there is also a clear distinction in genre and medium. Works on the political aspect of the Salem trials are mostly dramas and tragedies, genres which emphasize the horrific implications of the hunts. These genres also do not take the focus away from the horrors that are portrayed, but rather portray them matter-of-factly or even gently emphasize the gravity of the situation without making the tragedy too grand to take seriously. *The Crucible* is a clear example of this. The original play has its dramatic moments, which is understandable considering the drama of its plot. Still, its storytelling remains mostly neutral, with little in terms of backdrop, costuming or filler narration that might distract from the purpose of the play. While its 1996 adaptation certainly has some more flair in terms of drama, especially in the relationship between John Proctor and Abigail Williams, it is still not as extravagant as other movies from that era. The camerawork does not distract from the storytelling, and the music works to emphasize rather than create the tension and emotion.

Interestingly, stories that focus on the aspect of political persecution in the Salem trials are most often conveyed through forms of media that are considered more highbrow by social standards. The original production of *The Crucible* was in the form of a play, though it has since been adapted into almost every form of media available. These works seem to aim for a specific target audience, one of a higher class. Considering that *The Crucible* was created by a famous playwright to criticize those who punish people for being suspected communists, mainly politicians and corporations, the medium perfectly fits the message and its target audience. The narration that Miller starts the second act with, criticizing those that commit similar acts as shown in the play through McCarthyism, would directly aim for the audience consuming the play. While the high-brow nature of the medium means that there is a barrier of entrance to consuming *The Crucible* the way it was originally intended, later renditions

allow the story to be viewed by not just those who can afford theater tickets, but by anyone who wishes to learn about it.

The other category of Salem media differs tremendously from the one discussed above, both in terms of genre as well as medium. While its choice of genre varies tremendously, it is overall a lot more free in its portrayal of the Salem trials. From *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*'s clear place in the horror genre to *Hocus Pocus*' heavy focus on Disney-style comedy, it is difficult to pin down this category as a single type of medium. However, this wide variety of genres does have a common thread running through it, the pop culture legacy of the Salem trials. Horror and comedy, the two ends of the Salem genre in this category, are both staples in pop culture.

This also ties back to the types of media used to portray these stories, which are most often television and film. These are accessible forms of media to the general public, garnering more general popularity and viewership. This element even returns in pop music, with major artist Taylor Swift referencing witch hunts in relation to the perception of feminine rage in multiple of her songs, notably "Mad Woman" and "I Did Something Bad". These references to Salem and witch hunts in popular culture bring the topic to a wide audience, affecting the perception of the event by the general public. This relates back to the idea that society is far enough removed from the original events to turn them into a symbol, rather than associating "Salem" with the actual events of the hysteria.

No work better acts as a union of all of these genres and media than *American Horror Story: Coven*. Though it is a season of a television show, it works as a standalone piece in a similar way that film does. Being part of the wildly successful *American Horror Story* franchise also means that the work was set in American pop culture from the moment it was released (Janicker). *Coven* strikes a balance between the heavy elements of commentary on social issues such as racism and sexual abuse and more lighthearted moments of teenage

relatability. Its portrayal of racial issues has been written about extensively in the academic field. Amanda Kay LeBlanc wrote an excellent analysis on this in which she shows how *Coven* both condemns racism and relies on it to tell its story (“There’s nothing I hate more than a racist” 284). The complexity and controversy of the narrative proves its worth in the academic field alongside classics like *The Crucible*. Yet at the same time, it is a work that is enjoyed purely for its entertainment factor. A lot of the dialogue between the teenagers in the show is reminiscent of other teen dramas of the time. Madison’s cold attitude and dark sense of humor frame her narrative, but the occasional reveals of a softer side underneath make her a character with depth and relatability. Though the direct and gory style of *American Horror Story* is certainly not for everyone’s taste, the show has a large variety of elements and genres that allow it to be entertaining for a large scope of people. This brings the message about what one can learn from the Salem trials, about giving a voice and a face to the victims, to a larger audience that would have been achieved through other genres and forms of media, and its bold style makes it so this image of Salem will not soon leave the viewers’ minds.

Through all of this Salem has shown itself to be a canvas for creators to use as a backdrop to project their own meaning onto it. The hysteria is small enough to easily encapsulate in a piece of media, but also large enough for there to be elements to single out and dive deeper into. As a narrative, there is a clear division between good and evil, the oppressed and oppressors, that makes for an appealing contrast. The strict puritan society has come to symbolize any oppressive power, as in general any sort of behavior out of the ordinary was frowned upon, or at least that is the way this society is viewed through a modern lens. It is interesting that what is now seen as the good party is the evil from back in the day. Most media portray the victims either as the heroes or, when they are the villains of the narrative, are at least offered sympathy in their portrayal. The witch in *The Autopsy of Jane Doe* is helped by one of the coroners to end her curse by sacrificing himself. Even the sisters

in *Hocus Pocus*, who exemplify one of the most stereotypical Disney levels of villainy, are shown to have a sensitive side and even get a backstory in the sequel to prove that they were in a sense forced to become the villain by the town, and especially the reverend, who persecuted them. Though this movie certainly makes clear that the Sanderson sisters were quirky and evil by nature, the events of the movie only occur because of the punishments put upon them by others.

Aside from the division of good and evil, Salem has also managed to further compartmentalize itself into a series of cast members that fit a variety of archetypes. This makes a comparison to characters in other situations easier, and often leads to the real life participants of the trials becoming symbols in themselves. Reverend Samuel Parris is one of the often portrayed characters, symbolizing the oppressive Puritan power that caused the accusations against many of the victims. In real life, his daughter Elizabeth Parris and her cousin Abigail Williams were the first to be deemed afflicted by the witches magic. *The Crucible* shows the oppressive power of Parris by displaying his anger and how he beats Tituba in the first act to get her to confess her crimes. Elizabeth Proctor and her husband John, Sarah Good and Tituba are some of the most popular choices to represent the victims of the trials. Together they represent a range of types of victims, from the mystical native perspective often attributed to Tituba to John Proctor's respectable position in society that unexpectedly makes him the victim. These archetypes make it so that Salem easily works as a template to use as a metaphor for any modern day injustice. Though in real life these people had deeper and more complex lives than this, their transformation through time and art have made them ideal characters in any modern story.

What all of these narratives involving Salem have in common is centering the discussion on how a society deals or should deal with a mass tragedy, especially one caused by a moment of hysteria. For example, by linking the Salem trials to McCarthyism in *The*

Crucible, Miller warns against the signs of a mass hysteria that he has noticed in his own community. While at that point it would have been too late to prevent the fear and pushback against anything suspected to be related to communism, pointing out the similarities between both hysterias appears to be an effort to prevent it from spiraling further down to the level that Salem eventually reached, which caused many unnecessary deaths. In this sense, *The Crucible* can also be used to warn against future hysterias, as it reveals not only the absurdity of the Salem trials but also proves that hysterias happen in a pattern, repeating throughout history even if the society deems itself above that level of emotional reasoning. Seeing how *The Crucible* has been banned on and off throughout the United States ever since its release, its content is clearly still highly controversial. The development from Miller's social rejection after the release of *The Crucible* to its release as a major Hollywood movie shows the ebb and flow of the hysteria and its emotional intensity to consumers. However, in recent years, the appropriateness of *The Crucible* is once again up to debate. Alabama Senator Scott Beason spoke out in 2014 how he feels that the play is an inappropriate analogy, as, according to him, the Red Scare had more validity as a witch hunt than the Salem trials did (Benen). As book bans have returned to be a hot topic in America, *The Crucible* will once again be on the forefront of this debate. The acceptance of this story as a criticism of American policies will reflect the overall reception to America's historical errors, and in turn might predict if the country is doomed to repeat its mistakes. However, learning from Miller's notes on past and current societal issues through his work might be the key to coping with historical errors, as the past cannot be undone, but future repetitions can be prevented through education.

In the same sense, allowing the victims of a mass persecution to be the main focus of the narrative can be an excellent learning tool to cope with past mistakes and prevent them from happening in the future. While Salem's victims did not get to voice their perspectives, at least not in a way that was heard by the masses, *American Horror Story* has shown a

complexity to a group of characters that for the most part are seen as faceless victims in modern day society. By projecting the victims onto a set of characters that are meant to be their descendants, they become more than just names in a list. They get personalities, backstories and an appearance that is recognizable and relatable, boosted in part by the fact that the girls in the coven are quite diverse, especially compared to the original victims of the trials. Zoe, as the main character of the season, works particularly well to showcase the humanity of the victims. Her response to discovering her powers is shock and horror, followed by shyness and insecurity when thrown into a new world where she is constantly in danger of becoming a victim. While this story is highly fictionalized, it helps people associate the Salem trials with more than a footnote in their history books. Though it certainly does not work to educate people on the historical facts of the trials, it does flesh out people's emotional response to them and might encourage some to do further research into the actual events that inspired the show.

How Salem is treated by American society and media may be a reflection of how any historical tragedy will eventually be dealt with. The amount of time passed since the trials mean that they carry less weight, allowing for a more objective analysis of the wrongdoings. At the same time, more comedic and lighthearted interpretations are also welcomed by the general public. When on the timeline of other prominent tragedies the same distance will occur is unpredictable, but until then there is still plenty to learn from the legacy of Salem. Efforts to set the legacy straight have been occurring ever since 1693. When the mayor of Salem invited Nobel Laureate, author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel in 1992 to dedicate the Salem Witch Trials Memorial, the link between Salem and other tragedies was the focus of Wiesel's speech, showing the significance of Salem as a lesson for dealing with modern hysterias. The speech is an inspiring effort to encourage people to stand up to the injustices around them, making clear that what happened in Salem was not a standalone event, but

something that repeats throughout history. The choice to invite a Holocaust victim supports this point and ties Salem's message of focusing on the stories of the victims to efforts to do the same for the Holocaust victims. As Wiesel says best himself, "If I can't stop all of the hate all over the world in all of the people, I can stop it in one place within me. We still have our Salems" (Salem Witch Trials Memorial).

Conclusion: Why it matters that Salem matters

Considering the wide scope of hysterias and persecutions throughout American history, and the variety of tropes that can serve as a backdrop to explore these issues, it is indeed fascinating that Salem in particular has maintained such a grip on discussions of oppression and inequality. When looking at Google Books Ngram Viewer, there is a massive rise in discussions on witch hunts and witch trials since the start of the 21st century, mostly used in the context of political and social persecutions. Interestingly, the last time “witch hunt” spiked in mentions was in 1950, though its height is nothing compared to the data of 2019. It is clear that whenever issues of extremism and persecutions arise, the witch hunt becomes the main metaphor for discussing them. Especially for American witch hunts, Salem is on the forefront of these discussions. The nature of the trials allows for Salem to be both an infamous moment in American history as well as a legendary tale, usable by anyone as a form of entertainment. The United States can take pride in claiming this historic event and its remaining significance in pop culture, while also being able to distance themselves through time. Since the trials happened before the Revolutionary War, they can be rejected as truly being “American”, thus avoiding the subject of claiming responsibility for the injustices. Salem itself has certainly never denied its history and has put in effort to remember the trials and educate visitors on the dangers of mass hysteria. Still, it is nearly impossible to avoid the dramatization of the trials that is happening in popular media. As we are further separating from the trials with time, our emotional attachment will also continue to fade. It nevertheless remains important to approach the trials with a level of respect, especially towards the victims. Through all the myths and legends of the Salem trials it can be hard to remember that people’s lives were destroyed through the accusations and hunts. Finally putting the emphasis on those voices gives them the recognition they deserve and did not receive in their own time. The works featured in this thesis showcase the versatility that Salem has as a metaphor to

discuss social issues from a variety of approaches. However, modern media is constantly treading the line between justice and kitsch. Perhaps the difference between the two lies in the addition of these lessons that one can take away from the trials, rather than simply displaying all the gory details and fantasy additions for shock value. The ethics of this are a complex subject worthy of a thesis of their own, and opinions on this will differ depending on who is asked. In any case, it is clear that the popularity of Salem as a fantasy event in popular media has its impact on its legacy, for better or for worse. The Salem trials have taught the dangers of mass hysteria and the importance of critical thinking towards these kinds of accusations. Getting this message across might be considered more important than sticking to the factual events. If altering details of the trials makes them more likely to be seen by newer generations, the factual inaccuracy might be worth the benefits from people associating the events of the trials to modern day witch hunts.

Events in recent years have brought the discussion on witch hunts and mass hysteria back to the forefront. In the era post the COVID-19 pandemic, symptoms of a new mass hysteria are creeping up again. The economic crisis is leading people to want to blame society's issues on someone, and through the government and new regulations new potential victims are singled out. This is clear by the emergence of hatred towards drag performers, slowly pushing towards legislation against LGBT rights. The concept of children attending drag shows has been under a lot of scrutiny, these shows being considered inappropriate for children. Even though drag seems to be only a very small topic in the grand scheme of politics, it has been blown up by media and politicians focusing on the danger of the act for children. The targeting of those who perform in drag alludes to a new witch hunt. The language is already there, drag shows being labeled "sexually immoral" and "indicative of increasing anti-Christian sentiment in the U.S" by Ken Peters, a pastor leading protests against drag shows in Knoxville, Tennessee, as quoted in a Fox News article (Brown). Since

this issue is still unfolding, its true consequences will not be revealed until after the hysteria has settled. However, it is very clear that discussions on the appropriateness of certain elements of drag shows for a younger audience are being overtaken by the general idea that anyone who dresses up and performs in drag is guilty of inappropriate behavior towards minors. This has already led to threats and violence against drag performers, such as the instance in which a group of people from the extreme right-wing Proud Boys interrupted a children's story time event hosted by Kyle Chu, who performs drag under the name of Panda Dulce (Latifi). At the same time, mental and physical health care for LGBT youth is taken away under the guise of safeguarding their well-being.

In these times, when rightwing extremism is on the rise again, learning from the past becomes more relevant than ever. While it might be too late to stop the snowball from rolling down the hill, its final size is not yet determined. Through activism and education, it can still be possible to mitigate the impact of this wave of hysteria and extremism. Salem media is powerful in that it works to educate and prevent the further spread of a mass hysteria. Perhaps we will soon see another major work comparing Salem to current-day LGBT and racial struggles. Until then, there are still plenty of works to be inspired by in terms of learning from the past.

In any case, Salem proves that, while mass hysterias may be devastating to communities and their victims, it is also possible to recover from them as a society. Even more, places that were once home to strict social dynamics can turn around and end up becoming some of the most tolerant and accepting communities, embracing and celebrating what makes everyone unique. In its past and its present, Salem is a story worth remembering and worth telling, through all of its marvelous and wild variations.

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