"The Devil Made Me Do It": Re-examining the Salem Witch Trials Assignment Through a Modern Point of View

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"Satan's design was to set up his own worship, abolish all the churches in the land, to fall next upon Salem and go through the country," testified the accused William Barker Sr. during the 1692 Salem Witch Trials.[i] The fear of the devil in early America was beyond reason because in the Puritan world, even mere mortals were not protected from Satan's wrath. In twenty-first-century mainstream America, the notion of the devil walking the earth would hardly make the news—but would be relegated to TV series such as *Lucifer*. However, at one point, books like the *Malleus Maleficarum* offered deep insight into witches in Europe and what would become the United States.[ii] Throughout my teaching career, I have struggled to help students relate to the witch craze, whether in Europe or America. Part of the challenge is that educators have marginalized this history as a metaphor for the fear of McCarthyism, as seen through Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.[iii] As educators, we hope students grasp not only the dangers of mass hysteria but also the problems posed by Religion becoming fanatical in American history. Despite the separation of Church and state, it has shaped the nation's moral and political life. However, throughout its history, America struggled to delineate the line between Religion and public life, prompting Americans to go to court to clarify this boundary.

Although the European Witch craze claimed more lives—from 35,000 to as high as 45,000—colonial America is guilty of twenty-four lost lives.[iv] They have blood on their hands—nineteen were hanged and one was pressed to death.[v] However, we often reduce this event to a historical footnote—or, worse, to a fun Halloween activity.[vi] In my effort to bring attention to this colonial American tragedy, I have experimented with various assignments in my United States History 1 course from the Colonial period to end of Reconstruction.

My first assignment drew inspiration from the *Choose Your Own Adventure series,* popular from 1979 to 1998. To remain compliant with the US Copyright Law, I digitized and shared only a limited excerpt from *Salem Witch Trials: An Interactive History Adventure*, so students could have a

framework to help them imagine themselves in Salem and choose their own adventure. Using this excerpt as a starting point, I asked students, "What Would You Do?" Students choose one of three scenarios: 1) a friend has accused a young girl of being a witch, 2) your mother is accused of witchcraft, 3) or you think someone put a spell on you. After choosing a scenario, students had to decide how they would act if they were living in Salem in the 1690s.

Because students had access only to a small portion of the text, they were required to rely on their historical knowledge and creativity. I encouraged them to weigh their decisions in the context of historical time period. However, many students used this opportunity to create superficial fan fiction rather than critically engage with the historical realities of the period. While I appreciated the creativity, students took historical liberties to make their stories more interesting.

My second teaching concept was the "Salem Witch Trials Justice Paper." For this assignment, students would watch "What Really Happened During Salem Witch Trials" and "America's Hidden Stories: Salem's Secrets." My goal was to have students decide whether justice had been served for the victims of the Salem Witch Trials. Students were asked if they had been alive during that period, if they would have succumbed to the witch hysteria, or if they would have had a different approach that might excuse or condemn the behavior of the accusers. Finally, they were to reflect on how we should remember those who perished in this trial.

However, the main obstacle with this assignment was that students struggled to connect modern concepts of social justice with the world of colonial America. After this project, I came to an important realization. Students recognized from a historical perspective that what happened in Salem was wrong and justice should prevail, but they could not relate. They were psychologically distant from the events. They were not personally connected to it and had no reference point in their lives

For instance, one student wrote "It is really sad to think about all the people that suffered during this time because of a justice system that put their religious values over everything else." The student clearly feels remorse, but also knows this was tied to a specific date and time in history. She points out that it was "sad," because the justice system in Salem failed, but at the same time frames individuals as "victims" of an "authoritarian system," and simply "products of their time."

When the students completed the created-your-own adventure assignment, it was a similar issue. They made their stories more creative because the time period was too distant for them to place themselves in a similar situation or think more deeply about the torture or injustice the accused faced. These two assignments helped me come to the conclusion that there are two ways to teach history. We can have students learn history so they know the historical facts and can interpret them as moral failures of the past, or we can create opportunities for students to connect the past to situations that feels familiar to them, allowing them to recognize that the same human behaviors still exist today. While there is a fine line so as not to make anything ahistorical, it is important to think outside of the box so that history becomes real and relatable.

My third teaching project was titled "Salem Witch Trials Reflection: History of Scapegoating." In this assignment, I chose archival material so students could read the victims voices. I asked students to think more deeply about the townspeople's reactions during the trials. Why did they quickly blame their friends and condemn them to torture and death? I explained that throughout history, a select group of people has always been singled out and blamed for the woes of the majority. In their essay, students were to include what they learned about the Salem Witch Trials and about scapegoating, and to consider whether the Salem Witch Trials were a meaningful and relevant lesson for today. To support their analysis, students were encouraged to use details from the National Geographic's "Salem Witch Trials" and from the online Salem Witch Trial Archives.

When asked to reflect on the concept of scapegoating, many students struggled. Some did not think it was a significant part of American history; others chose not to address the question directly, and some produced a general statement about the unfairness of the trial. A few students had difficulty comprehending the meaning of the term "scapegoat." These assignments prompted me to reconsider my lesson—but I did not want to give up on it. I recognized that Salem was not an isolated event in history, but was part of a long chain of violence directed towards marginalized individuals.

I turned to Jack Mezirow's *Transformation Dimensions in Adult Learning.* My goal was to prevent students from recycling information they had previously learned in high school or potentially during school field trips to Salem. Mezirow argues that adult learners do not learn effectively by memorizing facts or attending additional lectures.[vii] Instead, meaningful

learning occurs when adults experience a "disorienting dilemma"[viii]— an event or idea that challenges their "existing frames of reference."[ix] In other words, educators must help adult learners dismantle their prior assumptions so they can critically assess why they believe what they do. Only through this process can genuine transformation take place.

In the case of the Salem Witch Trials, I needed to devise a plan to allow for this "transformation"[x]— one that would move students to empathy for those accused and executed during the Salem Witch Trials and deepen their understanding of the socio-political atmosphere that provoked the persecutions.

The one area I never thought to tap into was centering the discussion on the danger of Puritanism and how it easily influenced the townspeople. The solution to this problem arrived unexpectedly. Inspired by the *Conjuring* film franchise, which centers on demonic possession and faith, my t*ransformation* as an educator began. I was mesmerized by how the *Conjuring Universe* had successfully marketed faith without a clear conversion goal, earning a record-breaking of over 2 billion worldwide.[xi] This observation led me to ask a new question: Why do films with strong religious undertones, like the *Conjuring* universe, dominate the silver screen?

As with many superhero films, *The Conjuring* franchise encourages the main characters, Ed and Lorraine, to courageously face the unimaginable. Ed and Lorraine appear as almost *Marvel-like* spiritual superheroes who save the day from demons. In all *four Conjurings*, Ed and Lorraine save innocent, non-spiritual families in Western countries (America and England alike). As Captain America has a shield, Lorraine and Ed carry Catholic symbols—rosaries, crucifixes, and holy water—as their weapons against evil and to help coordinate an exorcism.

Ed and Lorraine can save the vulnerable from possession without fault as their faith is unshakeable. Only they can "make hell pay" before "all hell breaks loose," and they succeed every time because God empowers them to do so. This realization prompted me to question: Are Americans attracted to these films because of faith or because of the power of cinematic storytelling? Once I figured this out, I finally found new ways to teach my students about Salem. Just as Americans believed in Ed and Lorraine's divine mission, the Puritans of Salem were convinced that the devil dwelt among them. Both demonstrate a struggle against good and evil—whether grounded in faith, fear, greed, or post-traumatic stress

syndrome—that continues to shape the mindset of the American moviegoer despite a general decline in religiosity.

Pew has conducted several studies on Americans' religious practices, offering insight into how religion take shape in the United States today. It is a far cry from the cultural memory of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," but America has not yet fallen from grace. Instead, religion remains part of America's cultural framework — but it shows up in different ways. In 2022, Pew published *Modeling the Future of Religion in America*, which found a significant decline in Americans practicing Christianity: "As recently as the early 1990s, about 90% of U.S. adults identified as Christians. However, today, about two-thirds of adults [are] Christians."[xii] Americans born after 1992 tended to move away from their faith. Most significantly, surveys have also been conducted on Americans' reactions to the supernatural.

Jacob Ausubel related in his Pew Study, "Christians, religiously unaffiliated differ on whether most things in society can be divided into good, evil." Ausubel revealed Americans had different conceptions of evil. Most remarkable is that almost half of Americans—around 48%—believed that "most things in society can be clearly divided into good and evil."[xiii] Although the other half believes that "society [is] too complicated to be categorized that way," this demonstrates that a significant portion of the United States believes in the existence of evil.[xiv] Strikingly, Americans have a solid connection to the afterlife. Around 75% of Americans believe in heaven.[xv] Sixty-two percent of Americans acknowledge hell's existence. Of the Americans who accepted hell's existence, 44% believed there was a Satan.[xvi] Americans have, in greater numbers, believed in ghosts, a trend higher than in an earlier modern period. However, belief in the supernatural has always been part of American DNA, as early as the 18th and 19th century, with the New England Vampire Panic and the Bell Witch Haunting.[xvii] According to the Ipsos study, around 46 % believed in ghosts, a figure that is significant given the decline in organized Religions' involvement.[xviii] During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was greater interest in the paranormal as a means of coping with the uncertainty. This juxtaposition between people's opposition towards organized Religion and their embracement of the supernatural world reveals why Americans gravitated towards demonic films. After all, the heroes are Catholics, and the victims are generic non-practicing Christians who come to acknowledge that hell does exist on earth.

Religious scholar Colleen McDannell explains, “Religion is not merely learned in synagogues, mosques, and churches. The common admission— 'everything I know about religion I learned from the movies'—is true for believers as much as for unbelievers.”[xix] Movies are not scripture, and you cannot do communion with popcorn, yet American theatergoers have made assumptions about the religious-based films, as though Hollywood itself wrote the Gospels. Though no resurrection has occurred at an AMC, Christ has still led more than a few disciples to the theater in search of meaning. Christianity, specifically, possessed the silver screen. In particular, Catholic-infused possession films became more than a quest to stop lurking demons from ripping apart innocent souls. Instead, they reflected on how Americans could believe in the impossible and the supernatural in a specific time and place. Early to mid-twentieth-century Americans still viewed the nation through a largely Christian lens, a perspective reflected in possession-based cinema.[xx]

As a history professor, I understood one of the most striking aspects of American life was how the film industry influenced Americans’ views on Religion, regardless of their personal faith. In particular, Catholicism played a significant role in shaping Americans’ understanding of religious themes, especially the struggle between good and evil. By examining how Catholicism helped shape the film industry—and how its influence persisted after the Church’s direct control declined—I could develop a stronger framework for understanding my students, who are themselves consumers of pop culture.

Catholicism truly gained control over the production of films due to the fear of immorality consuming Hollywood in the 1930s.[xxi] To sell more tickets, especially during the Depression, American motion pictures lost touch with *decency.*[xxii] Jews, Protestants, and Catholics feared how the soul of America would become tarnished by the film industry. The chairman of the Motion Picture Association, William Hays, tried to create what is known as the “Hays Morality Code” and promised that “he would allow no dirt in pictures and failed to keep his promises—and failed miserably.”[xxiii] The National Legion of Decency, primarily composed of Catholics, also had Jews and Protestants join.[xxiv] The Legion instituted strict policies on film and rated the movies themselves. They were a force to be reckoned with: “The Legion dominated so much control over the films that a reviewer of Picture of the Week stated, ‘Whenever a drama with a religious background is used, almost invariably the hero has turned out to be a Catholic priest. Not that

we have anything against having our Roman brethren well depicted…it is just that in a land predominantly protestant, it seems a bit out of balance to have religious pictures go Catholic by ten to one.'"[xxv] Not only did Catholics boycott films, but they also would take pledges to protest " 'unwholesome movie pictures'" and "'to arouse public opinion against' the portrayal of vice as a normal condition of affairs."[xxvi] The boycotts made such an impact that Hollywood hired Catholic Joseph Breen, director of the Production Code Administration, to save itself from destruction and to bring God back to the movies. As Andrew Quickie explained, Breen decreed that "every film had to show moral compensating values for any evil that might be shown amounted to an attempt at Catholic social engineering."[xxvii] Breen altered any screenplay that did not fit into his moral sensibility.

Catholicism inundated American films. Catholicism entered mainstream popular culture, and American filmgoers began associating Americanism with Catholicism, an ironic historical turn considering anti-Catholicism in America:

> As the religion of many immigrants, Catholic characters represent outsider status as well as the 'American way of life.' Rather than being marginal to American popular culture, Catholic people, places, and rituals are central. At the movies, Catholicism—rather than Protestantism—is *the* American religion.[xxviii]

In other words, it did not matter if one was Protestant or Catholic; the film industry made them believe in the power of the Catholic faith. Americans had described their nation as Christian, with the apex of such revelation manifesting during the Cold War Era. Religiously inclined Americans perpetuated the mythology that the Founding Fathers desired a nation under God. In the early Cold War, America became a Christian nation in response to the "godless communists" whom fierce anti-communists feared secretly possessed the nation.[xxix] Under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, America became the quintessential nation entrusted by God. Historian Kevin Kruse explained that the Pledge of Allegiance was rewritten in 1953 to include the phrase "under God," and even "'In God, We Trust' was added to a postage stamp for the first time in 1954 and then to paper money the next year."[xxx] Though the film world and the real world aligned

with American religious beliefs, this did not always hold for American personal faith; however, it did remain true in the films.

Catholicism did not become exorcised from the screen. In fact, it evolved significantly in the horror genre, in which it was the one area where Catholicism could emerge as the embodiment of the heroes against evil. Though there were early horror films like Nosferatu (1922) that showed the power of Christianity, and confirmed, as scholar Craig Detweiler said, "horror films remain a robust genre for combining Christianity and cinema,"[xxxi]— *Rosemary's Baby,* in the 1960s, after the end of Breen's reign, paved the way for the *Exorcist*. Perceptions of America as a religious nation, albeit Christian, have also influenced the American horror genre, especially possession films, which came of age in the 1970s with the phenomenon known as *The Exorcist. The Power of Christ* may not have compelled Americans to faith in the 1970s, when *The Exorcist* came out; however, it did provoke visceral reactions. Because of the *Exorcist,* people began associating the devil with pea soup, possession, and priests—specifically, Catholicism. Catholicism dominated possession. Such a film made a lasting religious impact on the American population; regardless of Americans' spiritual practice, Catholicism became the savior from the devil.

The Exorcist evolved into more than just a horror film. Film critic Pauline Kael said, "The Exorcist was 'the biggest recruiting poster the Catholic Church had since the sunnier days of *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St. Mary.*"[xxxii] Clergy even felt connected to *The Exorcist,* as it made the battle between good and evil real, allowing films like The *Conjuring* to bring faith to horror. The *Exorcist* secured Catholics' place in exorcism history through the character Clinical Director Dr. Barringer, who made the following statement to Chris, Reagan's mom, in the film. Unable to find a reason for Reagan's peculiar, disturbing, unnatural behavior, Dr. Barringer said:

> Have you ever heard of an exorcism? It's a stylized ritual in which rabbis or priests try to drive out the so-called invading spirit. It's pretty much discarded these days, except by the Catholics who keep it in the closet as a sort of embarrassment. It has worked, in fact, although not for the reason they think, of course. It was purely the force of suggestion. The victim's belief in possession helped cause it. And just in the same way, this belief in the power of exorcism can make it disappear.[xxxiii]

The short film *The Cultural Impact of the Exorcist* captured Americans' over-the-top reaction to the film. Indeed, Americans were so captivated by this film that they were willing to drive hours to the movie theater to find a showing of *The Exorcist,* even waiting in line for hours in the cold to attend one of the showings. Americans were so convinced of the reality of *the Exorcist* that, mentally, some viewers had difficulty watching the entire film in one sitting. They would vomit, faint, or scream in terror while watching the movie. Some people had mental breakdowns and had to seek further care in the hospital; ambulances waited in some theaters in anticipation of medical emergencies. There were even people who had to be committed for psychiatric counseling.

The documentary emphasized that Americans did not have to believe in a higher power to be impacted by this film. Regardless of a person's faith background, *The Exorcist* shaped public perception, enabling Americans to believe that demonic possession was real. Even as practice in the United States declined, Americans remained intrigued by religious-based films, particularly horror. More importantly, movies like *The Exorcist* had such an influence that they could cause filmgoers to experience hysteria.

This phenomenon led me to view the Salem Witch Trials from a new perspective. I realized the students could better understand the Salem Witch Trials if they could relate them to a modern example. Considering America's long history of engaging with film—which even continued after the Hays Code era, as seen in the fascination with *The Conjuring Universe*—I recognized the potential to link the Salem Witch Trials to the world of cinema. Following in the footsteps of Mezirow, I sought to create a "transformative" learning experience for the students by providing them with an accessible framework, such as *The Exorcist,* so they could explore the multilayers of Salem, hysteria, belief, and fear.[xxxiv]

I realized that students would not relate to Salem by simply watching a horror film like *The Conjuring*, but that they needed to tap into the phenomenon of *The Exorcist*. Whether or not they had seen the film was unimportant, as I knew they were familiar with demonic possession because of the popularity of *The Conjuring Universe.* By observing how individuals from the 1970s overreacted to *The Exorcist,* students would be able to understand the hysteria in Salem. Unlike colonial America, students would most likely have relatives or friends who remember the release of

The Exorcist, providing them an accessible connection to an event rooted in fear and belief.

I completely recreated the Salem Witch Trials into a radio program rather than a formal academic paper. Aligning my approach with Peter Felten's "Principles of Good Practice in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," I decided to incorporate podcasts into my curriculum. Many students consume and create content on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.[xxxv] Also, many aspire to become "influencers" and are drawn to expressing themselves openly in environments where they feel in control.[xxxvi] In the classroom, students may hesitate to speak out of fear of peer judgment. As educators, we must remain connected to the next generation of students and the ways they engage with learning materials—especially in the age of social media. I asked myself how my students learn most effectively and how I came to this understanding. Online, they often feel freer to express their thoughts authentically.[xxxvii]

As a result of this revised assignment, students began, for the first time, to see how the human mind can believe in witches, vampires, and even Sasquatch when emotion outweighs reason. In Salem, belief was shaped by the way townspeople were taught; in contemporary America, belief can be shaped by the power of visual persuasion. Once students realized this, they began to see why Salem was so significant because it reveals a timeless human vulnerability. From those willing to join new religious movements or follow a radical leader without protest, humanity reveals its cruelest truth: people can commit the most heinous acts when they are convinced they are acting in righteousness. Indeed, the students observed that just as some Americans in the 1970s, Reagan was truly possessed; they could now understand how individuals during the Salem Witch Trials could accept false accusations of demonic witchcraft based on spectral evidence.

The Salem townspeople were inundated with a fear so powerful it could cut like a blade through the human heart. The Salem Witch Trials show us why hysteria was able to penetrate through Salem and neighboring areas because they genuinely believed the devil could turn anyone into a witch. Such a figure embodied Salem's worst nightmare, showing how even the most rational could succumb to fictitious belief in Satan's power. Though, as a historian, I can still hear the cries of the innocent placed in the dark dungeons, my students' comprehension of Salem's story—on the other hand—was reduced to a bunch of figures and facts without a soul. This

epiphany helped me to refocus my Salem Witch Trials project into a more transformative experience. *The Exorcist* also proved that fear and faith can still provoke even the most secular. By pointing out to my students the parallels between the events that led to Salem and the hysteria caused by *The Exorcist,* I was able to instill a modern framework for how belief, fear, and authority can alter a person's perspective on the world.

I finally realized that I had been missing *the forest for the trees*. I needed to create a path that would transform my students from passive observers to active learners. Through film and podcasts, my students began to understand that the witch trials were not simply superstitious tales, but part of a large narrative about Americans' inability to confront the unknown without suspicion of something darker. The intense reactions of moviegoers to *The Exorcist* helped my students grasp why the villagers of Salem so readily accepted the words of the preacher, leaders, and teenagers— they, too, were struggling to make sense of irrational behavior for which they could find no rational explanation.

After completing this new project, I went back to review whether this experiment was effective. Did students learn, and were they engaged? From a data perspective, all twenty-seven students completed the assignment. The minimum requirement was to complete a five-minute podcast. Students were asked to watch one lecture by Dr. Justin Sledge, a National Geographic documentary on the Salem Witch Trials, and a short documentary on *The Exorcist* phenomenon, entitled *The Cultural Impact of The Exorcist*.

The data were as follows: 1 out of 27 students (3.7%) fell below the requirement; 6 out of 27 (22.2%) met the requirement; and 20 out of 27 (74.1%) exceeded the five-minute minimum. In total, 96.3% of the class met or exceeded the requirement. This suggests that the method was successful and that the students were willing go beyond expectations, likely because the assignment was relatable.

In addition, from a qualitative perspective, I observed a high level of creativity. Some students created original podcast show names, incorporated visuals, designed a game-show format, used sound effects and character voices, and, in some cases, integrated PowerPoint presentations to enhance their shows.

Student reflections further reinforced their engagement, particularly in how they connected both time periods. Many students saw the parallel between the Salem Witch Trials and *The Exorcist.* As one

student explained: “It is interesting to see how we can go back to the 1600s and see similarities of people reacting to the movie and people reacting to the witch trials.” He also observed that people “flocked” to see the Salem executions, in ways similar to audiences were drawn to *The Exorcist.*

Others emphasized how fear extends beyond the present moment. One student noted that she was struck by how *The Exorcist* “hysteria spilled out beyond the theater into everyday life… so to tie it all together from early colonial witch trials to the madness of Salem to a horror movie that people were falling the same pattern.” She further reflected that the “real horror story here is not witches or demons but the way fear itself can be contagious over and over again…the scariest monster might just be our history how we fear it.”

Across multiple responses, students identified similar emotional responses to both events. One student remarked that *The Exorcist* “mirrors the earlier patterns of hysteria seen in Salem and other colonies, with the girl in the movie being possessed also mirroring the ‘bewitched’ girls from Salem, the people reacted with similar emotions. Fear, hysteria, psychological distress.” Another student emphasized that Salem was not an “isolated event, it was part of a bigger story that shows how fear can shape communities, destroy lives, and still echo modern times…the real worry isn’t the witches, demons, or monsters it just how people react to itself.” Although this is only a sample, I was intrigued by how students had an easier time understanding, relating to, and empathizing with the horrors of Salem when I utilized popular culture.

By applying Mezirow’s idea of pushing students “out of the box” to help them become genuine learners, I have come to recognize that twenty-first-century students will only become better students if we try other means to connect them with the past. As educators, we must look beyond our traditional methods to create transformative experiences. By asking students to explore this topic through a new lens, I am inviting them to think critically and discover empathy. Salem’s story may have a beginning and end, but the lessons will never be buried like its human victims.

My pedological experiment has shown me the power of transformative learning. Indeed, the colloquial saying “the Devil Made Me Do it”—part of the title of *Conjuring 3*—appears to have more relevance in society today, tomorrow, and the future than one would have expected. The devil may live only in our imagination. However, whether real or not, he has the power to persuade even the unbeliever to believe in the

impossible—an unimaginable truth that even the Lord's Prayer could not protect. From Salem to *The Exorcist*, the two worlds are more intertwined than different. For as William Faulkner says, the "past is never dead. It's not even past."

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[ix] Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 14-15, 42.

[x] Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning,* 14.

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