

Illuminating Hysteria: Characters, Conflict, and Social Commentary

LEARNING STRATEGIES:

Word Map, Marking the Text, Double-Entry Journal, Think-Pair-Share

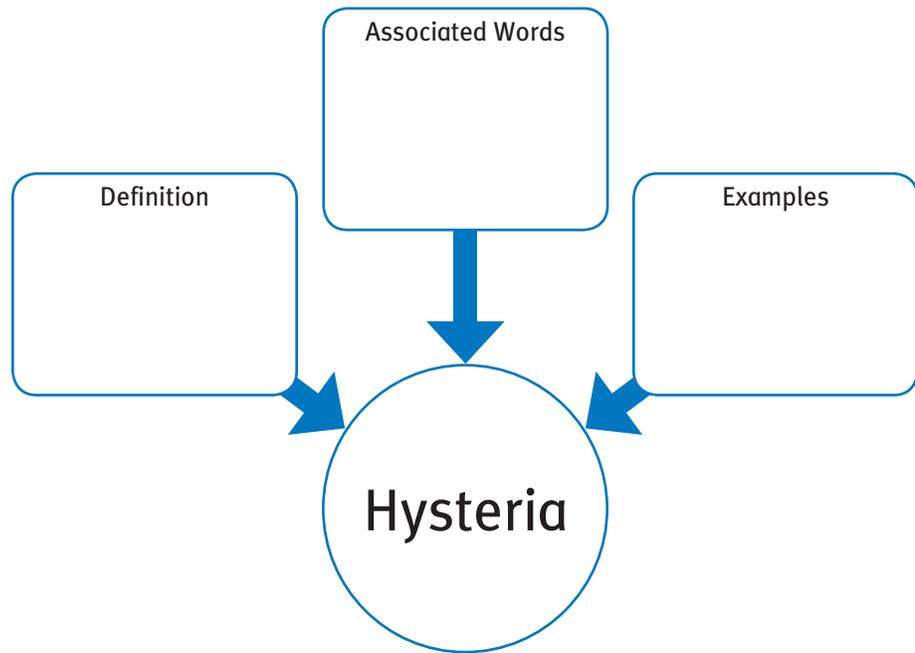
My Notes

Learning Targets

- Define and explore the motif of hysteria in *The Crucible*.
- Create a script for one dramatic scene.

Before Reading

1. The final scene in Act One shows the girls hysterically yelling out the names of people they have seen with the devil. While it is possible that each of the girls is simply lying, it is also possible that they, or at least some of them, are in the grip of hysteria. Eventually, much of the town succumbs to this hysteria. What reasons can you generate for the girls' hysterical behavior? Brainstorm possibilities in the margin and share your ideas with your group.
2. Use the word map below to take notes during a class discussion of *hysteria*.



During Reading

3. To help you distinguish *rumor* from *hysteria*, reread an excerpt from the article “The Lessons of Salem,” which provides historical information about hysteria. Mark the text for possible explanations for the girls’ behavior. Be prepared to share them in a class discussion.

Article

The Lessons of Salem

by Laura Shapiro

“Today many scholars believe it was clinical hysteria that set off the girls in Tituba’s kitchen. Fits, convulsions, vocal outbursts, feelings of being pinched and bitten—all of these symptoms have been witnessed and described, most often in young women, for centuries. Sometimes the seizures have been attributed to Satan, other times to God, but ever since Freud weighed in, hysteria has been traced to the unconscious. As Dr. Richard Pohl, of Salem Hospital, told a Tercentenary symposium, hysteria “can mimic all the physical diseases known to man,” and occurs when repressed thoughts and emotions burst forth and take over the body. Life could be dreary for girls in 17th century Salem: their place was home and their duty was obedience; many were illiterate, and there were few outlets for youthful imagination except in the grim lessons of Puritan theology. Dabbling in magic in the reverend’s own kitchen would have been wonderfully scary, perhaps enough to release psychic demons lurking since childhood.

Despite the fact that young girls made the accusations, it was the adults who lodged formal charges against their neighbors and provided most of the testimony. Historians have long believed that local feuds and property disputes were behind many of the accusations, and in “Salem Possessed” (1974), Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum uncovered patterns of social and civic antagonism that made the community fertile ground for a witch hunt . . .”

4. As you read the fable “The Very Proper Gander” by James Thurber, consider the **motif** of hysteria by creating a double-entry journal about its characters’ reactions to the gander. For each word or phrase that you underline in the story, record a question, connection, or insight related to that text. Use your Reader/Writer Notebook or the My Notes space.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Thurber (1894–1961) was a popular American writer and artist. He was born in Columbus, Ohio, but moved to New York and became a writer and artist for the *New Yorker* magazine. His stories and cartoons were noted for the way he used humor to portray scenes from everyday life. James Thurber made a career out of poking fun at modern human beings and their complicated society.

My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS
What are the major reasons presented to explain the hysteria that took over the girls of Salem?

Literary Terms

A **motif** is a recurrent thematic element—such as hysteria, a crucible, or witchcraft—or pattern—such as the Hero’s Journey.

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My Notes

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

If Thurber is indeed poking fun at society, as he was apt to do, who and/or what is the object of his mockery? In other words, what is his social commentary?

Fable

The Very Proper Gander

by James Thurber

Not so very long ago there was a very fine gander. He was strong and smooth and beautiful and he spent most of his time singing to his wife and children. One day somebody who saw him strutting up and down in his yard and singing remarked, "There is a very proper gander." An old hen overheard this and told her husband about it that night in the roost. "They said something about propaganda," she said. "I have always suspected that," said the rooster, and he went around the barnyard next day telling everybody that the very fine gander was a dangerous bird, more than likely a hawk in gander's clothing. A small brown hen remembered a time when at a great distance she had seen the gander talking with some hawks in the forest. "They were up to no good," she said. A duck remembered that the gander had once told him he did not believe in anything. "He said to hell with the flag, too," said the duck. A guinea hen recalled that she had once seen somebody who looked very much like the gander throw something that looked a great deal like a bomb. Finally everybody snatched up sticks and stones and descended on the gander's house. He was strutting in his front yard, singing to his children and his wife. "There he is!" everybody cried. "Hawk-lover! Unbeliever! Flag-hater! Bomb-thrower!" So they set upon him and drove him out of the country.

Moral: Anybody who you or your wife thinks is going to overthrow the government by violence must be driven out of the country.

After Reading

- Using details from both texts, explain how Thurber's fable relates to the action in Act One of *The Crucible*.

Check Your Understanding

Writing Prompt: With a partner, create a script for a scene in which you use the characters of Thurber's fable to show how hysteria grows out of rumor and unfounded accusations. Use your script-writing checklist. Be sure to:

- Include a dramatic scene that illuminates the injustice of hysteria.
- Format your script using the guidelines in your script-writing checklist.
- Use purposeful dialogue and stage directions.