

[John Proctor does, indeed, go to Salem, but to no avail. The town has “gone wild,” allowing emotion to overcome all reason. Based on inadequate evidence, the people of Salem have made a hasty generalization. As a result, fourteen people are hanged.]

Perhaps we are inclined to tell ourselves that these events in Salem took place more than three hundred years ago and, therefore, do not apply to our contemporary world. However, we need only to look back to the mid-twentieth century to see a series of events dominated by emotion rather than reason—the McCarthy hearings in which the House UnAmerican Activities Commission investigated persons accused of being communists. In fact, this occurrence inspired Miller to write *The Crucible*. Appealing to fear—the post-World War II threat of communism, the “Red Scare”—this group in Congress thwarted or ruined the careers of many journalists and actors in this country. Again, as in colonial Salem, reason was overcome by emotion. Indeed, the term “witch hunt” has as much viability today as it did in the late 1600s. Currently, western society is struggling to offer citizens protection from terrorist threats without infringing on individual rights. We must remain vigilant to avoid becoming victims of our own flawed reasoning, bound to purely emotional appeals. Examining literature such as *The Crucible* helps us to practice this vigilance.

ACTIVITIES

In order to practice analytical reading and critical thinking, as well as making connections to modern issues, read the following texts and answer the questions that follow.

POEM FOR ANALYSIS

Barbie Doll (1971)

This girlchild was born as usual
and presented dolls that did pee-pee
and miniature GE stoves and irons
and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy.
Then in the magic of puberty, a classmate said:
You have a great big nose and fat legs. 5

She was healthy, tested intelligent,
possessed strong arms and back,
abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity.
She went to and fro apologizing.
Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs. 10

She was advised to play coy,
exhorted to come on hearty,
exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.
Her good nature wore out 15

like a fan belt.
So she cut off her nose and her legs
and offered them up.

20

In the casket displayed on satin she lay
with the undertaker's cosmetics painted on,
a turned-up putty nose,
dressed in a pink and white nightie.
Doesn't she look pretty? everyone said.
Consummation at last.
To every woman a happy ending.

25

Answer this
question

1. After reading Marge Piercy's poem, "Barbie Doll," several times, explain the action and events of the final two stanzas. What ambiguity and/or irony do you notice?
2. Write out a potential theme for this poem. Which lines from the poem support this theme? Give two to three specific quotations.
3. Look up the history of the Barbie doll. Why does Piercy use "Barbie Doll" as the title? Why does she not mention the doll again in the poem? What is the effect of this ambiguity?
4. Consider current images of women in pop culture and the media. How might this poem, first published in 1971, demonstrate an issue that still resonates today?
5. Read the following student essay, written as an in-class, timed writing assignment. What is the thesis (or claim)? Does her explanation of the theme of "Barbie Doll" match your understanding of the poem? Why or why not?

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Life as Plastic

In society's ever-judging eyes, there is no better measure of a woman's worth than her physical beauty. The ideal woman must be dainty and symmetrical, flawless of skin, and thin. The health of the woman does not matter; she can, and sometimes will, starve herself until she is able to count every rib and has to hide her gaunt, discolored face beneath layers of makeup in this pressured pursuit of perfection. Beauty is often painful: it is hunger and anxiety, uncomfortable clothing and surgeries. There is nothing beautiful about letting society mold a human being into a living Barbie doll, like what happens to the "girlchild" in Marge Piercy's poem, "Barbie Doll" (1).