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LESSONS

Benjamin Franklin's Satire of Witch Hunting

Lesson prepared by National Humanities Center staff.
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Framing Question

How does Benjamin Franklin's satire of a witch trial argue that human affairs should be guided, above all, by reason?

Understanding

Many people in the eighteenth century, especially the educated elite in Europe and America, believed that truth was discovered through reason, through the application of principles discovered through science, observation, and experimentation. In "A Witch Trial in Mount Holly" Benjamin Franklin asserts the primacy of reason by satirizing efforts of those who would seek truth through superstition and irrationality.

Portrait of Benjamin Franklin, circa 1746. Courtesy of Harvard Art Museums.

Text

Benjamin Franklin, "A Witch Trial at Mount Holly," 1730, from Founders Online, from the National Archives. Suggested secondary sources from "Divining America: Religion in American History" from the National Humanities Center: *Deism and the Founding of the United States* by Darren Staloff and *The First Great Awakening* by Christine Heyrman.

Text Type
Informational text: Literary non-fiction, satire.

Text Complexity
Grades 11-CCR complexity band.

Background

The *Pennsylvania Gazette* was founded in Philadelphia in 1728. A year later Benjamin Franklin and a business partner bought it and in the following decades turned it into one of the most popular publications in the American colonies, printing reports from other papers as well as local news. In eighteenth-century America people hung on to newspapers, especially in inns, because paper was precious. They circulated widely, and with high literacy levels in Philadelphia, we can assume that the *Gazette* had a substantial general readership. Franklin frequently contributed articles, as he did for the October 22, 1730, edition when he published, anonymously, a satire datelined "Burlington, Oct. 12."

Untitled when it appeared, a nineteenth-century editor dubbed it “A Witch Trial at Mount Holly.” The brief narrative describes the determined efforts of a mob in a small New Jersey town to find a man and a woman guilty of witchcraft after they had been accused of making sheep dance and hogs sing. In a normal proceeding only the accused would be tried, but in this one the accused cut a deal to put their accusers, also a man and a woman, on trial as well. The mob decides upon two tests. In the first the men and women will be weighed individually against a “huge great” Bible. If it outweighs them, they are witches; if they outweigh it, they are not. In the second test they will be cast into water. If they sink, they are innocent; if they float, they are guilty. The inclusion of the accused in the tests makes the proceedings less a trial and more an absurd experiment in which scales and water are used to detect virtue and vice. The tale is told by the sort of narrator who often appears in satire, an urbane, witty figure who coolly observes the action with an amused, tolerant attitude.

The article, presented as local news, is a literary hoax, similar to two others Franklin published in the *Gazette*. As far as scholars have been able to determine, he was neither reporting on nor responding to an actual event, certainly not a witch trial. No one has found records of one in New Jersey or Pennsylvania in or around 1730. Franklin may have written the piece to underscore themes in two other articles that appear in the October 22 issue. The lead story — datelined Paris, February 27 — describes the ridicule visited upon a Monsieur Languet, a bishop and a member of the esteemed French Academy, for a biography he wrote of a nun who died in 1690. The author of the article denounces Languet as a “Fanatick and a Visionary” for retailing stories of apparitions the nun claimed to have experienced. In language that echoes “A Witch Trial” the narrator notes that Languet’s book is surely “the Amusement and Diversion... of the thinking Part of the People of Paris.” The other article — datelined Oxford, July 30 — recounts the comic struggle that broke out over the body of a murderer named William Fuller after it was cut down from the gallows. As officials try to get the corpse out of town, they must fend off a mob and then a determined band of “gownsmen,” Oxford medical students, who want to carry Fuller off for dissection. The officials fail, and Fuller ends up serving science at Christ Church College. At one point the mob tosses Fuller’s coffin into water, and the gownsmen leap on it “like Spaniels,” much as a sailor in Mount Holly leaps on one of the men on trial as he floats in the local mill pond.

In addition to sharing language and motifs — repetition of the phrase “the thinking part,” mob behavior, and jumping on floating bodies — these stories share themes with “A Witch Trial.” The Paris story underscores the primacy of reason in its description of the ridicule the educated heap upon Monsieur Languet for his belief in apparitions. “A Witch Trial” also asserts the primacy of reason as the narrator mocks the people of Mount Holly for their belief in witches. Comic as it may be, the Oxford story recounts the triumph of science and empiricism, perspectives that drive the satire in “A Witch Trial.” It would not be surprising if these stories inspired Franklin to write his satire. He was twenty-four in 1730, and the piece reflects his youthful embrace of Deism, a form of religious belief, influential among the elite in eighteenth-century America, that placed faith in reason and rejected the supernatural.

Teaching the Text

Contextualizing Questions

1. **What kind of text are we dealing with?**
2. **When was it written?**
3. **Who wrote it?**
4. **For what audience was it intended?**
5. **For what purpose was it written?**

In addition to illustrating how satire works, this piece could be used to highlight cultural differences between the educated elite of the eighteenth century who were influenced by Enlightenment thought and the common folks who were not. The publication date of 1730 places the piece on the earliest fringe of the First Great Awakening, which had its initial manifestations around New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Thus the satire could be seen as foreshadowing the attitude many among the elite took toward the religious emotionalism, which they called “enthusiasm,” of those caught up in the Awakening’s fervor. Although Franklin later befriended the preacher George Whitefield, a major figure in the First Great Awakening, he remained suspicious of the revival’s enthusiasm throughout his life. In 1730, as a twenty-four-year-old, his firm embrace of the rationalistic philosophy of Deism could easily have moved him to take aim at the irrationality of enthusiasm as it might manifest itself in a witch hunt.

We provide the text in its entirety. Franklin wrote it as a single paragraph. We have numbered the sentences to make it easier to teach. For close reading we have analyzed the article through fine-grained, text-dependent questions. The version below, designed for teachers, provides responses to those questions. The classroom version, a

printable worksheet for use with students, omits those responses and this "Teaching the Text" note, while it provides a more student-appropriate version of the background note.

We offer two interactive exercises, accessible by clicking on this icon:  . The first asks students to do three things: identify words and phrases that make the piece a satire, explain why the language they chose is satirical, and compare their choices and rationales with ours. You may want to make these tasks, or at least the first two, a pencil-and-paper assignment. This exercise lends itself well to whole-class discussion with projection on a screen or smart board. The second exercise asks students to draw a conclusion from the piece. The student worksheet also includes links to the interactive exercises.

Text Analysis

Burlington, October 12

1. Saturday last at Mount-Holly, about 8 Miles from this Place, near 300 People were gathered together to see an Experiment or two tried on some Persons accused of Witchcraft.

What does Franklin do to establish the "authenticity" of his hoax? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

Through the dateline "Burlington, Oct. 12" he tells his readers that the incident took place in a real place at a specific time. He then offers details that make the dateline even more specific and thus make the event more believable. It took place "Saturday last" in the town of Mount-Holly, which he is careful to locate "about 8 miles from this Place." Moreover, he tells us about how many people were involved, "near 300."

What are the connotations of the word "experiment"? (Note: The word "experiment" is a key term in the story and deserves extended attention.)

It suggests science and unbiased, rational, carefully conducted inquiry that follows the rules of logic.

What do experiments usually seek to do?

Experiments usually seek to test a hypothesis, an assumption or proposition that calls for some sort of test to see if it is accurate or valid.

What is the effect of the narrator's use of the word "experiment"?

The narrator ridicules the witch trials by calling them experiments. Clearly, they are *not* carefully reasoned, logical attempts to test a verifiable hypothesis. Rather, they are inappropriate and ineffectual attempts to determine a person's guilt or innocence. By applying the term to the witch trials, the narrator ironically highlights the extent to which they diverge from rational processes of science and stray into superstition. The term bestows a comically inflated dignity and importance to this slapstick enterprise.

In addition, the term helps to define the narrator's persona. It suggests that he is a man of the Enlightenment, familiar with the ways of science. Indeed, he seems more interested in how the trials are conducted than in their outcome. Note his careful description of each step. Note, too, that he never tells us how the mob judges any of the men subjected to the tests.

2. It seems the Accused had been charged with making their Neighbours Sheep dance in an uncommon Manner, and with causing Hogs to speak, and sing Psalms, &c. to the great Terror and Amazement of the King's good and peaceable Subjects in this Province; and the Accusers being very positive that if the Accused were weighed in Scales against a Bible, the Bible would prove too heavy for them; or that, if they were bound and put into the River, they would swim; the said Accused desirous to make their Innocence appear [desiring to prove their innocence], voluntarily offered to undergo the said Trials, if 2 of the most violent of their Accusers would be tried with them.
3. Accordingly the Time and Place was agreed on, and advertised about the Country; The Accusers were 1 Man and 1 Woman; and the Accused the same.
4. The Parties being met, and the People got together, a grand Consultation was held, before they proceeded to Trial; in which it was agreed to use the Scales first; and a Committee of Men were appointed to search the Men, and a Committee of Women to search the Women, to see if they had any Thing of Weight about them, particularly Pins.

How would you describe the persona of narrator or "reporter" of this story?

The narrator/reporter is calm, casual, off-handed, bemused, and condescending.

How does Franklin create this persona? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

Franklin creates the persona through the language the narrator uses. It suggests that he is not necessarily well informed or even terribly concerned about what is going on: the people have gathered to see "an Experiment *or two*"; "*It seems*" that the accused

are charged with witchcraft. He describes two remarkable accusations, but any others he dismisses with an off-handed "&c." He highlights the comic nature of the charges by turning one of them into a joke. If sheep were made to dance in "an uncommon manner," one is tempted to ask how they commonly dance.

What is the narrator's point of view? How does Franklin establish it? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

The narrator stands apart from the other spectators. While the townspeople are passionate in their demand for a trial and, it would seem, a guilty verdict, he calmly and wittily observes the scene and describes it without any of the bias that fires the crowd. He is deeply *uninvolved*. Franklin further establishes the narrator's distance from the townspeople by having him ironically describe these rather simple provincial folks with comic exaggeration. They meet in "grand Consultation." They are "the King's good and peaceable Subjects." Of course, there is nothing "peaceable" about them; they are a mob in pursuit of a verdict they have already reached.

Activity: Franklin's Satirical Language

In "A Witch Trial at Mount Holly" Franklin ridicules the thinking of the people of Mount Holly with language that is in some places obviously humorous and in others finely subtle. This online activity explores his use of satire.

5. After the Scrutiny was over, a huge great Bible belonging to the Justice of the Place was provided, and a Lane through the Populace was made from the Justices House to the Scales, which were fixed on a Gallows erected for that Purpose opposite to the House, that the Justice's Wife and the rest of the Ladies might see the Trial, without coming amongst the Mob; and after the Manner of Moorfields [in the eighteenth century, an open space in London, often the site of markets and shows]a large Ring was also made.
6. Then came out of the House a grave tall Man carrying the Holy Writ before the supposed Wizard, &c. (as solemnly as the Sword-bearer of London before the Lord Mayor) the Wizard was first put in the Scale, and over him was read a Chapter out of the Books of Moses, and then the Bible was put in the other Scale, (which being kept down before) was immediately let go; but to the great Surprize of the Spectators, Flesh and Bones came down plump, and outweighed that great good Book by abundance [a large amount].
7. After the same Manner, the others were served, and their Lumps of Mortality severally [separately] were too heavy for Moses and all the Prophets and Apostles.

What are the connotations of the word "plump"? How does Franklin use it in the story?

It suggests weight, flesh, heaviness. Franklin uses it for comic effect. With it he undermines the seriousness of the scale trial. We can almost see and hear — the word is slightly onomatopoeic — the accused plummeting to the ground and bouncing upon arrival. Moreover, the word "plump" reminds readers that the subjects are flesh and blood, merely human, and not supernatural beings.

What does the term "Lumps of Mortality" refer to? How does Franklin use it?

It refers to the bodies of the people tested in the scales. "Lumps" echoes "plump" and, like that word, suggests weight and heaviness. Linking it to "Mortality," Franklin again reminds his readers that the accusers and the accused are mere mortals, not witches. Juxtaposing "Lumps of Mortality" with "Moses and all the Prophets and Apostles," the narrator suggests the absurdity of attempting to learn something about the supernatural from a test that measures only the weight of flesh, blood, and bone.

8. This being over, the Accusers and the rest of the Mob, not satisfied with this Experiment, would have the Trial by Water; accordingly a most solemn Procession was made to the Mill-pond; where both Accused and Accusers being stripp'd (saving only to the Women their Shifts [undergarments]) were bound Hand and Foot, and severally placed in the Water, lengthways, from the Side of a Barge or Flat, having for Security only a Rope about the Middle of each, which was held by some in the Flat.
9. The Accuser Man being thin and spare [bony], with some Difficulty began to sink at last; but the rest every one of them swam [floated] very light upon the Water.
10. A Sailor in the Flat jump'd out upon the Back of the Man accused, thinking to drive him down to the Bottom, but the Person bound, without any Help, came up some time before the other.
11. The Woman Accuser, being told that she did not sink, would be duck'd a second Time; when she swam again as light as before.
12. Upon which she declared, That she believed the Accused had bewitched her to make her so light, and that she would be duck'd again a Hundred Times, but she would duck the Devil out of her.
13. The accused Man, being surpriz'd at his own Swimming, was not so confident of his Innocence as before, but said, *If I am a Witch, it is more than I know*.

14. The more thinking Part of the Spectators were of Opinion, that any Person so bound and plac'd in the Water (unless they were mere Skin and Bones) would swim till their Breath was gone, and their Lungs fill'd with Water.

15. But it being the general Belief of the Populace, that the Womens Shifts, and the Garters with which they were bound help'd to support them; it is said they are to be tried again the next warm Weather, naked.

Activity: Satire as a Corrective

Satire is often practiced as a corrective of behavior. Satirists may imply a course of action to improve, reform, or change in some way the target of their ridicule. This online activity explores Franklin's possible correctives.

What does Franklin mean when he says that the male accuser "with some Difficulty began to sink"? Why would he include this detail?

He suggests that the man initially floats but sinks only when he tries to. This detail sets up the narrator's ridicule of "the more Thinking Part of the Spectators," for while they reach the correct conclusion about people with air in their lungs floating, they mistakenly conclude that a thin person's physique would cause him or her to sink.

How does Franklin focus our attention on the word "naked"? What function does it play in the story?

He makes us pause before it and heightens its comic effectiveness by setting it off with a comma. Functioning rather like the punch line of a joke, it completely demolishes any pretense to seriousness that the trials may have claimed and suggests their true purpose as entertainment for the masses.

How does Franklin characterize the trials? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

Franklin portrays the trials as essentially comic, thoroughly unserious undertakings — note the deal by which the accusers are put on trial, the "plump" landing in the scale trials, the search for pins, the attempt to sink the floaters. He also characterizes them as an entertainment spectacle. They are advertised. The scales are set up on a gallows to enable the ladies of the town to view them without going into the crowd. To accommodate that crowd, town officials have cleared an open space "after the Manner of Moorfields." When it becomes apparent that the trials will have to be repeated, officials insure a crowd by promising nudity at the next performance.

How does Franklin portray the people of Mount Holly? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

He portrays them as simple-minded, superstitious bumpkins. Franklin makes explicit fun of them throughout the story. They think pins are "Thing[s] of weight"; they are surprised when the men and women outweigh the Bible and land "plump" on the ground. Finally, they reject the resoundingly conclusive results of the scale test. Portraying their failure to understand what is clearly before them, Franklin reflects the fear, widespread in eighteenth-century America, that religious enthusiasm will prevent meaningful education.

Image Credit

Robert Feke, portrait of Benjamin Franklin, oil on canvas, ca. 1746. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Harvard University Portrait Collection, Bequest of Dr. John Collins Warren, 1856, H47. Photo: Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reproduced by permission.