



Grim Old Days: William Manchester's A World Lit Only by Fire

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GRADE LEVEL: 8TH–12TH GRADES

Lesson Overview

"Grim Old Days: William Manchester's A World Lit Only by Fire" by Chelsea Follett strives to "deromanticize the past" by profiling parts of William Manchester's 1992 bestseller A World Lit Only by Fire. It includes startling evidence about the "grim old days," including cannibalism, plagues, and the gruesome torture of religious dissenters.

This lesson invites students to delve into the attitudes, beliefs, and habits of Europeans during the Middle Ages and compare them to our contemporary lives. By understanding the harsh conditions that most people endured before the Industrial Revolution, students may develop a deeper appreciation for our current high standard of living and enlightened attitudes toward our fellow humans.

Media

"Grim Old Days: William Manchester's A World Lit Only by Fire" by Chelsea Follett

Warm-Up

The social "safety net" refers to government support to help people experiencing poverty and homelessness. Examples include food and housing assistance, Social Security payments to seniors, financial aid for orphans and blind people, unemployment and disability insurance, Medicaid (health insurance), and free and reduced school lunches.

Have students think about the social safety net and how it affects their lives. Ask them: Is someone in your family receiving government benefits, such as Social Security? Do you have a friend who buys school meals for a reduced price?

In pairs, have students make a list of as many social safety net programs they can think of and then share their list with the class. Write items on the board and explain what they are



and who they are meant to help.

Have students discuss their options if, unfortunately, they had fallen on hard times before these programs. Ask them: What would you do? How would you survive? Before the social safety net existed, what options were available to a person of your age and background?

The "Grim Old Days" article describes life in the Middle Ages and premodern periods before such government help existed. Ask students to imagine as they read what life would be like for someone their age during that period.

Questions for Reading, Writing, and Discussion

These questions will guide students as they read and encourage them to think critically about the material. They will also be a basis for class discussion and the extension activities/homework.

- Reread the paragraph that begins, "[T]he home of a prosperous peasant lacked [most] amenities." Reflect on the long-term consequences of Europeans' robust immune systems due to living alongside domestic animals. In particular, how might this have influenced Europeans' interactions with and conquest of indigenous peoples in the Americas post-1500?
- According to the article, what may have been the ulterior motives for the grisly public executions described? Hint: It's connected to chronic hunger.
- Identify 3 habits of people during the Middle Ages that you find particularly offensive. This is your chance to voice your thoughts and explain your reasoning.
- Explain 3 ways that medieval cities differed from their modern counterparts.
- What factors contributed to the shorter average lifespan before the Industrial Revolution?

Extension Activities/Homework

The article mentions Erasmus several times. Who was he? What influence did he have on later movements, especially the Enlightenment? How are his ideas reflected in mainstream ideas about religious toleration today?

Have students learn more about Erasmus by watching this [short video](#) and reading [this profile](#) from Human Progress. Then, ask students to write a 1,000-word report in which they respond to the following:

- Briefly summarize Erasmus' life and career.
- Describe the historical context. What significant events were occurring in Western Europe



during the period that affected his life experience?

- What were the causes of Erasmus' pleas for religious toleration?
- What effects did the thinking of Erasmus have on the Enlightenment?
- How do his ideas on tolerance continue to impact American society and institutions in the 21st century?
- How does Erasmus's outlook represent a historical change from the prevalent views on religion during his lifetime?
- Compare Erasmus's ideas about religious toleration with those of a prominent non-Western leader during the 1500s. For example, Akbar the Great, Suleiman the Magnificent, or Shah Ismail I. What was similar about Erasmus' views and the religious policies of these men? What was different?

CREATE YOUR OWN CONSPIRACY THEORY

The article refers to a calendar from Mainz, Germany, "which designated the best astrological times for bloodletting."

Bloodletting—the practice of withdrawing blood from a person's veins for therapeutic reasons—has been common for thousands of years and was popular well into the 19th century. Today, however, it is a discredited practice widely known to harm the patient.

The Mainz calendar supports a pseudoscientific theory. It may be compared to false advertising or even a conspiracy theory. Take a close look at this [bizarre calendar](#).

There are many contemporary conspiracy theories. Some are dangerous and foment and spread anti-Semitic, racist ideologies, while others are amusing and innocent. For example, the [Voice of America](#) writes that "despite the huge amount of evidence, the dust and rock samples, the television footage, and the hundreds of thousands of people who made it happen, polls show as many as 6% of Americans believe the Apollo 11 astronauts never landed on the moon."

The US National Archives maintains an [Online Exhibits page](#) with thousands of authentic images and stories documenting American life. Have students peruse the site and select an exhibit to explore. Some enticing examples include "When Nixon Met Elvis" and "The Herbert Hoover Galleries."

STUDENTS' TASK

Have students make a Google Presentation in which they create a plausible conspiracy theory using genuine material from the National Archives site.

Their presentation must include at least 5 slides. Each slide must have at least 5 sentences and at least 1 image.



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For the text, tell students to be creative and include details about the personalities involved and their supposed motives. Have them imaginatively link seemingly disconnected events to each other in entertaining ways. Students may only use images from the National Archives Online Exhibits.

Students should not include any information that targets a specific group or encourages discriminatory attitudes and should keep it light and amusing.