

# Salem witch trials essay sample

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In the year 1692 in the city of Salem, Massachusetts, the population was mainly made up of Puritan settlers, a group of English Christians who did not agree with the church of England. The city of Salem formed a part of the Massachusetts Bay that was under British colonial rule at that time. The Salem witch trials were a series of hearings and prosecutions in which people were accused of witchcraft. However, the real cause of the mass hysteria is still unclear today. The cause of the mass hysteria in Salem can also be explained through other realistic and convincing reasonings such as the strong believe in the occult, disputes, rivalries and personal differences, as well as by confessions that were made under high pressure, or the Ergot poisoning theory (Wikipedia).

The Salem witch trials all started when two young girls began making strange noises and acted uncommonly without any reason. The girls' names were Betty Parris (age 9) and Abigail Williams (age 11). As they interrupted church with their unusual noises and behaviour, the town's doctor diagnosed them with witchcraft. In response to these accusations (witchcraft was considered a serious crime at the time) the two girls in turn accused three other women of casting spells on them. Following all these accusations further counter accusations were made leading to a series of court trials. In these trials altogether over 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft.

The Salem witch trials were a cruel consequence of these accusations that caused over 20 deaths and more than 150 people were put into jail. Some of the prisoners died in jail due to the poor conditions (Ducksters). The first theory for the cause of the mass hysteria in Salem was based on the serious

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tensions within and towards the group of settlers caused by rivalries – especially personal differences between families – as well as disputes and strong belief in the occult. This shows the importance of how the people back then were acting when these incidents took place (The New Yorker). As to the rivalries it is said that these have started with strong disputes between the Putnam and the Porters families.

The Putnams were farmers who followed the lifestyle of traditional Puritans. The Porters obtained their wealth from farming too and, however, by opening up their own business. The rivalry began when a dam feeding into a sawmill owned by the Porters broke and thereby flooded the Putnams farms. This event resulted in a lawsuit brought by John Putnam Sr against the Porters family. According to the website HistoryList; “ Putnam’s’ rival family, the Porters tried to organize the villagers against the trials.

But the attempt had failed and 19 of their supporters got accused of witchcraft”. Therefore another likely cause for the mass hysteria may have been the attempt of provoking the villagers to fight between each other and see how they defended themselves. Another similarly likely cause could lie in religious rivalries and strong belief in the occult among the settlers. Puritans believed in the existence of witches and witchcraft was associated with the devil. At the time of these events the British administration revoked the royal charter that guaranteed religious independence and the settlers feared loss of their rights including religious freedom.

Ultimately the entire Puritan settlement of Salem was at risk of losing control and feared renewed religious persecution leading to strong tensions and

allegations of witchcraft among them. In addition to the first theory, it is possible that the cause of the mass hysteria were confessions that were exerted by high and cruel pressure. According to Andrews, Evan, an author of the article on the website HistoryList, it is a historical fact that at the time “ Practicing black magic was once considered a heinous crime on par with rape and murder” (HistoryList). In these days the allegation of witchcraft was a very serious one being a crime of the quality of rape and murder. Therefore it was allowed to apply very cruel and brutal ways of questioning an accused person. These methods would nowadays be considered as torture.

Pressure can be applied in different ways, such as physical torture, force, intimidation, isolation, violence and hunger, etc. Standard ways of torture were for example submersion, confessions by dunking and spectral evidence. Other ways were the so called swimming tests and pressing. A touch test meant that a person would be afflicted with punches would become calm when the witch who cast a spell on them touched them. The method of pressing was applied by placing heavy stones on the accused person. This was supposed to force out a confession from the accused, but unfortunately this approach did not always end well, as some died during its application because they couldn't breathe any more.

All these forms were used to put people under high and cruel pressure for the Salem witch trials. In consequence, most accused people would confess and allege others of being a witch just to finish their very brutal torture and questioning (PBS). While the first two theories are based more on human interaction and are very difficult to be proved the following reason is more

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based on an external and natural circumstance that occurred relatively often at the time. The third theory is based on the likelihood of a food disease caused by a fungus. At the time of the Salem trials, Ergot was quite a common cause for food poisoning. Ergot is a fungal disease of rye and other cereals that can lead to various symptoms and sensations on the human body and brain.

Rye was one of the widely spread grains grown by the settlers in the Massachusetts Bay. Ergot thrives in warm, damp during rainy springs and summers. According to the diaries of Salem residents, exactly those conditions were present in 1691. In the article “ The Witches Curse” the behavioural psychologist professor Linda Caporael is quoted as reporting that: “ Toxicologists now know that eating ergot-contaminated food can lead to a convulsive disorder characterized by violent muscle spasms, vomiting, delusions, hallucinations, crawling sensations on the skin and a host of other symptoms — all of which, are seen present in the records of the Salem witchcraft trials” (History of Massachusetts). However, the following summer of 1692 was dry, which could explain the ending of the “ bewitchments.” Still, all these facts and conclusions for the third theory are mainly circumstantial, but it represents the only reason not based on human interaction.

It stems from all known external factors being the Ergot, the weather at the time and the symptoms described among the persons accused of witchcraft (The Salem Journal). In conclusion, there are many possible and valid reasons that could have led to the Salem witch trials. All of them are realistic and could have led to the mass hysteria. There is no firm evidence for any of <https://assignbuster.com/salem-witch-trials-essay-sample-essay-samples/>

the reasons as it happened more than 350 years ago. In essence, the main question of the essay is if it was witchcraft or if there are other possible reasons for the Salem witch trials. Within the many theories for why the mass hysteria started the following ones are the most likely ones: Tensions within or towards the group of settlers; confessions created under pressure (torture) or the external reason of food poisoning.

While all reasons have their own right and realistic foundation I think that the last mentioned reason food poisoning is the most likely and realistic cause for the mass hysteria which gave rise to the Salem witch trials. Given the long period of time elapsed since then it is extremely hard to prove or decide on any of the theories for the mass hysteria and there are many scientific researches on this question. Any interested reader can make up his own mind and decision on what he thinks was the root cause of this tragic event and if it could happen under similar circumstances again.