

The salem witch trial



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Many assumptions have been made by historians to explain the occurrence of the Salem witchcraft trials, and on why the afflicted girls behaved the way they did, but yet there still seems to remain a sense of doubt on this issue. It seems that this case is not just because of one factor such as Ergotism, but several more. The affliction started by mind suggestion. The early beliefs and superstitions in Puritanical society that were practiced on an everyday basis supported the idea that the behaviors and physical conditions of the afflicted girls were the evil works of the witches, and the Devil.

Among many Puritans, this belief becomes a fear, and then this fear becomes like an additional topping that adds up to causing convulsive hysteria and also hallucinations which were caused by Ergot Poisoning. So, here is where the role of Convulsive Hysteria and Ergotism comes in play. The ergot poisoning in Salem villagers' every day meal of bread made with 'rye' leads to severe physical disorders, hallucination of witches and devils, and other serious symptoms. The symptoms of convulsive Hysteria and ergot poisoning are very much similar to the symptoms of bewitchment that the afflicted girls in Salem had had.

Many of the Puritans lived in a society where hearing a powerful positioned person or a committee say something was often believed to be truth. It seems as if the Puritans lived in a world that was half filled with lies and that they were brainwashed. The witch hunt started when the controversy of the illness of the afflicted girls became a crime, since the church members who dominated the power over New England, referred this illness to be some sort of witchcraft.

In *The Western Heritage*, the author states: " Had people not believed that certain gifted individuals could aid or harm others by magical means, and had they not been willing to make accusations, the hunts could never have occurred" (Donald 460). The Puritans were all brainwashed by the church. These everyday beliefs of possessing magical powers and the existence of witches and the Devil seem to have mostly shaped the Puritans' decisions on controversial issues such as witchcraft itself. The Puritans could not have thought of witchcraft as the cause of the illness (bewitchment), if they had never been implanted with such beliefs.

This is why it is very important to observe the views of the Puritans. Especially on how the religious beliefs presented by the church shaped their views on the issue of the witchcraft trials, causing them to fear the witches and the Devil, and so this fear becomes a key ingredient in causing convulsive hysteria, and also hallucinations related to witches and the Devil which is caused by Ergot poisoning. A Convulsive Hysteria is provoked by deep fright or excitement. A patient of Convulsive hysteria exhibits powerful emotions of fear.

Hysteria is a neurosis, which manifests itself by over action of some parts of the nervous system. The fear is often centered on a body part, most often on an imagined problem with that body part. People who are `hysterical` often lose self-control due to the overcoming fear. This fear can be related to the Puritans' fear of witches and the Devil. The illness of the afflicted girls seemed to be getting worse every day. The condition of the victims were very close to death, and this caused the Puritans to fear even more on what they believed as the evil powers of witches and the Devil.

So, such trauma must have provoked a convulsive hysteria, which means Hysteria must have been the reason for those conditions of the victims. According to "The Visible And Invisible Worlds Of Salem", "Similar symptoms are reported throughout the trial records. Choking is unusually common: there are cases of arc de cercle, and the hysteric's ability to induce bruises or welts on the skin may well explain some of the "teeth" marks" (Davidson & Lytle 33). These symptoms of Convulsion Hysteria seem to be similar to the symptoms of "bewitchment".

For example, the afflicted girls often accused their tormentor for strangling on their throats, which is relevant to choking sensation in Convulsion Hysteria. Since the people at that period did not have much knowledge on Medical science and health, and had to often rely on natural herbs and witch-doctors, not only must have Hysteria occurred, but there must have been other health related issues that might have affected the way the afflicted girls behaved. Ergot poisoning can be a possibility. The convulsive symptoms that can be a result of consuming poisonous ergot contaminated rye bread must have been the cause of girls being bewitched.

Rye is a common grain which was heavily relied by the Puritan society during that time, and the important part of it to highlight is that it was contaminated with the fungus (Ergot). It is most likely to grow in damp conditions. Variations in weather are therefore crucial for its growth. In New England, Rye was often grown when wheat crops were devastated by rust. Consuming Ergot causes hallucination and suffocation, which might have been interpreted at that time by the Puritans as being tormented or possessed by the Devil.

During hallucination, the afflicted would sometimes picture witches and the Devil chasing after her. She faces her deepest fear causing a lot of agony to herself. In "Ergotism: The Satan Loosed In Salem?", the author states: "the choking suggests the involvement of the involuntary muscular fibers that is typical of ergot poisoning; the biting, pinching, and pricking may allude to the crawling and tingling sensations under the skin experienced by ergotism victims..... the physical symptoms of the afflicted and any of the other accusers are those induced by convulsive ergot poisoning.

The symptoms of ergot poisoning are very relevant to the accusations of choking, pinching, and pricking that are often made by the afflicted during the trials. So, therefore due to the huge similarity between the symptoms of ergot poisoning and the symptoms of bewitchment, it can be said that part of the reason why the afflicted girls behaved the way they did was because of eating the poisonous ergot contaminated rye bread. Like discussed earlier, there are more than one factor that affected the way the afflicted girls behaved.

It starts off from mind suggestion, then the implanted beliefs of magical powers and the belief in the presence of witches and the devil becomes sort of a fear in the Puritans' minds. As the rumor of witchcraft begins to grow even more intense, therefore, this fear provokes Convulsion Hysteria and hallucinations out of ergot poisoning that is somehow related to the witches and the Devils These two disorders seem to have a very profound similarity in their symptoms, when compared to the symptoms of the bewitchment. So, these are the reasons why the afflicted girls behave the way they did.