

Lasting effect of the salem witch trials

Literature, American Literature



The Salem witch trials was an iconic part of American history. It has been an ongoing topic of discussion for historians. The Salem trials have been the subject of numerous plays, novels and researches.

The trials have peaked the interests of a varied array of people right from the moment they took place. Although they took place three and a half centuries ago the trials have been re-visited through different time periods. Currently, in the twenty-first century many of Salem Villager's (current day Danvers) attractions are places such as the Salem Witch Museum and the Witch House, these places are not only a popular destination for tourists but also for locals.

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Salem village located in the Northern coast of Massachusetts was infamously known for its 1692 witch trials. The witch trials in Salem erupted as the witch craze in Europe began to fizzle. Although the witch frenzy in America began with Salem, and then it spread to numerous nearby localities. During this time frame the 500+ inhabitants of Salem lived in two very discrete communities, there was Salem Village and Salem Town. While Salem Town was located closer to the Atlantic, filled with many influential citizens and any possible forms of communication with the outside world, had become a metropolitan of sorts. While on community was bustling with life, the other one was tucked into the nook; surrounded by wilderness. The village was known for its agriculture, and farm land, but was cut off from and sense of modern thinking. The inhabitants of Salem village were mainly farmers and servants who abided by the more traditional and religious ideas. With this

backward thinking it's easy to see why Salem was able to succumb to the idea of witch practices. The witch fever in Salem started when young girls in the village began displaying symptoms of choking, fits and seizures. In January of 1692 the 9 year old daughter and the 11 year old niece of the Reverend Samuel Parish began to show these symptoms. Soon these symptoms were displayed by other girls in the community. In this time period there was lack of medical expertise who could correctly diagnose the situation, It then when there was no conclusion about the source of the girls ailment that local doctor William Griggs in accordance to the general attitude and beliefs at the time; made a diagnosis that the conditions of the girls at Salem was not one due to a medical illness but one caused by an evil hand [Ray].

When the girls were questioned about the source of their ailment they refused to answer until one girl finally gave in and pointed her finger at Tituba; the mixed breed slave of Reverend Parish. They claimed that they had been under the influence of witchcraft; under the influence of the devil. The girls played a vital role in the process of getting two other women alongside Tituba guilty of practicing witchcraft. During the trials of these three women the girls were heavily relied on. When Tituba eventually confessed to the crime of dabbling in Witchcraft she said " The Devil came to me and bid me serve him." In her confession she admitted that she was guilty if partaking in witchcraft, she said that she and the two other women had signed the book of the devil, with the mission of destroying the puritans.

Contrary to Dr. Griggs diagnostic, medical research has shown that the reason for the symptoms was a fungal poisoning. The fungal poisoning was caused by the consumption of bread that had been made from rye that had been infected by fungi. It's not quite surprising that these symptoms have occurred considering the fact that bread (and other grain) were a staple food; in Salem and nearby towns. The weather conditions at the time were also in favor of the fungal growth. This fungal epidemic didn't start with Salem. Similar symptoms had occurred periodically in Europe several years prior to the witch trials of 1692 [Caporael 23].

It is important to look at the religious scenario at the time. Religion was an integral part of Salem, the Puritan ideology was deeply rooted in the members of its society. The people of this society from the moment they were born were invested into this lifestyle, and it would follow them into the afterlife. They believed in the existence of an afterlife and that their crimes before death would follow them there [Stone 3]. In order to ensure that everyone could read the Bible there was an emphasis on literacy. Members of the society were expected to abide by a strict moral code and adhere to a rigorous church schedule. Anyone who chose to rebel was worthy of punishment from God. The Puritans were deeply devoted to God and strongly believe in his power, they were afraid of the punishment he would cast upon them. Therefore they try to avoid partaking in activities that would categorize them as sinners at any cost. For Puritans holiness was a matter of the soul, being unable to attain this would mean you were unworthy. As a child being born into the Puritan society would mean that you were told

stories of hellfire and made to fear eternal domination if one was sinful [Stone 3].

The amount of faith they had in god was immense, but they equally believed in the existence of the Devil. This fear in the devil meant that by association witches; practitioners of the dark arts who were influenced by the devil, were also sinners. Not only is this a fear in the devil it's also a fear of the unknown.

In this situation almost anybody could be accused of practicing magic. But contrary to the misogyny centered European witch hunts, the Salem trials had several men who were tried and hanged. During the trials it was uncommon for a woman to accuse her husband of witchcraft, but this courtesy was not extended to them. There were a number of men who would eagerly accuse their wives. Similar to this situation it was uncommon for the men to accuse other men [Washington Post]. The accused women were commonly childless, or they were considered to be old hags. Not only were the women in their community mainly accused, but a vast number of Native Americans were also accused of colluding with the devil. This was due to the reason that the Natives did not worship any god or have a religion. In the eyes of the puritans it meant that they could easily succumb to the influence of the devil [Stone 5]. An example of this would be Tituba; the mixed race Native Indian and African slave from Barbados, who was accused of witchcraft by the girls in the Parish household.

It can be said that the Puritan ideology is a form of theocracy. Theocracy is a form of government where religion plays a pivotal part in the final judgment.

As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary theocracy is a system of government in which priests rule in the name of God or a god. This form of government was commonly followed by early civilizations and started to diminish after the age of enlightenment [Encyclopedia Britannica]. Contrary to what sources have said it can be seen that this form of government was followed during the time of the Salem witch trials.

The Salem Witch trials are an example of how religious extremism and misogyny lead to the ill-fated death of many people. As mentioned above there men, who were also a part of the trial, but in contrast to the number of men who were hanged there was a greater number of women who were hanged. The fact that there were men who were willing to claim their wives as witches was a result in the piety they had towards god. The puritans had blind faith in what was preached in the bible. What is ironic about this situation is that the ones who mainly accused people of witchcraft were not those of a lower and less educated background, but those where who were well known in society and had the most knowledge about witches.

The unfair amount of accusations throw at women in comparison to those thrown at men during the witch trials can easily be seen. This unfairness can be due to the fact that women during the 16th century were challenged at every turn. The patriarchal system which wouldnt let them act according to their wishes. Although women never demonstrated any modern methods of feminism; such as rallies they tried to express themselves in the conditions they were facing. An increase in the education of women regarding subjects such as politics and culture let to the empowerment to these women. In the

dynamics of the 16th century women were only allowed a limited amount of involvement in social affairs. They were advised against taking any political stance that countered the views of their husbands. In this society women were more or less expected to take charge of domestic affairs and nothing more than that, speaking up against this never ending cycle of patriarchy would mean that they could be thrown out of their homes.

In specific if an unmarried woman were to voice her opinion then she would be the focus of a witch hunt. The members of the society would feel that she was possessed by the devil for disrupting their way of life. An example of this would be the case of Anne Hutchinson; although this isn't in the context of Salem it's an example of a woman who was tried for when she voiced her opinion and took part in controversial activities. Anne Hutchinson, was a well educated woman, who followed the puritan ideology. She challenged the authority of the clergy, and for doing so she was accused of witchcraft. After denying the transubstantiation charge and refusing to incriminate other puritan women she was claimed to be guilty. After being found guilty by the court she was burned at the stake.

A feminist study conducted by Karlsen dealt with witchcraft on a mass scale. Her study, *A Devil in the Shape of a Woman* analyses data on the witch trials from both Europe and New England. Her analysis of these trials draws the conclusion that a majority of the people executed under the claim of witchcraft were mainly women who were over the age of 40 or unable to give birth. Karlsen also claims that the women who were accused did not fit into the traditional patriarchal framework. These women were not obedient

housewives but rather chose to voice their opinions, they did not aid in the reinforcement of male domination within their home or in the community.

Activities of this nature would be viewed as deviant by those who followed the traditional puritan views. Contrary to other studies on topics of similar nature, Karlsen sticks to her claim that the executed and accused women were held in a higher regard in society. She also stated that the clergy and political figures issued an apology after the end of the trial, when they were forced to admit their mistake and a handful of these men went and privately apologized to the families whose member was a victim of the trials. The beliefs in witchcraft and the perception of women in New England were forever irrevocably redefined. Karlsen's view on the trials were that they were a means to keep the nonconformist women of Salem in check. To make them fear the possibility of death and a slave to male authority. [Koicic 3].

Professor Reiser's work *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (1999) is another work which deals with the reason behind why women were mostly accused and executed. In drawing the conclusion to her research she uses several texts which testify that the women in New England were to be under a more strict watch as they could possibly be influenced by the devil. Like Karlsen she also states that after the events of Salem there was a shift in the perception of women.

One of the most notorious works on the Salem trials is *The Crucible*. Written in the year 1953 by play writer Arthur Miller. The play is a metaphor for the Red Scare (fear of communism) which was taking place at the time. The word crucible as defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary refers to a

ceramic/clay pot in which metals can be melted and purified. While Arthur Miller never uses the word crucible in the play itself the title of the play acts a metaphor for the entire Salem witch trials, and Millerr's play itself. Millerr's play reflects the Salem community at the time of the trials; one that was engulfed by mass hysteria. It illuminates the effect of the theocratic government Salem was operating in at the time, and the ruthlessness of men in a higher position. While the crucible is play talking about the Salem witch trials, in reality it was a mirror used by Miller to reflect the communist hysteria at the time. Some may ask the question of what mass hysteria is. Mass Hysteria is a phenomenon that is also referred to as ? collective obsessional behavior. The people effected by the psychological condition believe in the existence of a threat to their existence, whether real or imaginary. And the Salem trials are described as one of the most notorious cases of mass hysteria in Colonial America.

Many scholars have come to the conclusion that the Witch trials have had a lasting effect on American history. It can be seen that the aftermath has played a great deal in shaping the area.