

Salem, spectral evidence and recovered memory syndrome



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Hush-hush whispers in the shadows. Unspeakable things which take place in the cover of darkness. Suspicion and wariness. Dysfunctional interpersonal relationships.

The word of one person against the word of another—a scenario with no witnesses. A culture of repression. These are all statements which may easily refer to the situation in late 17th-century Massachusetts, a situation ripe for the eruption of an event now known as the Salem Witch Trials. We tend to think of Salem as a once-in-an-American-lifetime incident, something that came and went and disappeared from further repetition. While certainly important to those involved at the time, most people today see little to no lasting impact of that period, much less see any kind of parallel to events of recent history.

Those adopting that particular attitude, however, might be mistaken in their beliefs. Those initial statements—statements of fear, shame, and mistrust—may not only be applied to the Salem witch trials but also to a more contemporary development. The repressed/recovered memory movement which began in the 1980s elicits some of the same images, issues and emotional responses that can be found when studying early colonial America's reactions to the witch trials. To fully understand any possible correlations between the two, an evaluation of the trials in Salem, the use of spectral evidence and their correlation with the repressed/recovered memory movement must be undertaken. During both what we today would term “ preliminary hearings” and the trials concerning charges of witchcraft in eastern Massachusetts beginning in 1692, three types evidence might be

brought against the accused. The first, spectral evidence, will be discussed in more detail.

Spectral evidence was based upon the belief that once a person had contracted with the Devil, the Devil could then take that person's form to cause mischief and harm, as well as to recruit others into his evil ways. The second, non-spectral acts of malefic witchcraft, were "openly visible to anyone who observed the misfortunes of life, and chose to put a diabolic construction upon them." (Craker 1997, 332) These charges were usually based on disagreements between neighbors or ill-will towards others in the village, and they could be as simple as looking the wrong way at someone, and then that person's cow dying the next day. The final form of evidence used in Salem was confessions. Confessing individuals were in a sense publicly declaring they had made a pact with Satan and in the process verifying that those charges leveled against them were, in fact, true.

It is the use of spectral evidence in Salem that has long been the most controversial of the types of "proof" used to convict the accused witches. A small group of mostly young women were responsible for nearly all accusations of spectral bewitchment. Such testimony regarding spectral evidence could be quite persuasive. Spectral evidence was an especially well-used device in the grand jury-type preliminary hearings. Read also Salem Witch trials questions and answers" Sarah Good being Asked if, that she did not then hurt them who did it. And the children being again tortured she looked upon them And said that it was one of them we brought into the house with us.

We Asked her who it was, she then Answered and said it was Sarah Osborne, and Sarah Osborne was then under Custody and not in the house; And the children being quickly after recovered out of their fit said it was Sarah Good and also Sarah Osborne that then did hurt & torment or afflict them— although both of them at the same time a distance or Remote from them personally—there were also sundry other Questions put to her and Answers given thereunto by her according as is also given in.” (Levin, 1960, 5)The small group of accusers would typically name a “ witch,” claiming that they had been asked to sign a paper or to make a contract with the Devil. Falling down in the meetinghouse as the accused were brought in, these girls would appear afflicted by the witch, screaming in pain and torment. Oftentimes, the girls would state that the defendant had appeared to them at night— even on nights the accused were locked away in jail.

Of course, no one but these girls could ever see the specters they claimed came to them with evil intentions. However, this spectral evidence was sometimes bolstered by other “ evidence” against those charged. “ After accusations of spectral appearance had been made by members of this select group, which was said to be ‘ bewitched’, ordinary people from the community stepped forward with additional accusations of non-spectral acts of witchcraft against thirty of them.” (Craker 1997, 332)Not everyone, however, was enchanted with the power of spectral evidence.

Early on during the trials, questions were raised concerning the reliability of evidence used to convict.” However tainted [Bridget] Bishop’s reputation— she had, among other things, been accused of witchcraft before—the disposition of her case stirred misgivings. This included the resignation of <https://assignbuster.com/salem-spectral-evidence-and-recovered-memory-syndrome/>

one of the Court's judges as well as a consultation by the governor and council with leading ministers regarding the judicial process, particularly its use of spectral evidence." (Latner 2008, 139) Among that group of ministers were the Mathers, Increase and Cotton, father and son. In discussing what types of evidence should be used in court, Cotton Mather considered the use of spectral evidence as acceptable—on a presumptive basis. " There are Presumptions, which do at least probably and conjecturally note one to be a Witch.

These give occasion to Examine, yet they are no sufficient Causes of Conviction." (Craker 1997, 336) Spectral evidence, it seems, was presumptive but not conclusive. In order to convict a witch, other, supporting evidence must be provided." By this formula, spectral evidence could be used to indict, but not to convict. For this, either confession or evidence of non-spectral acts of witchcraft would be required.

But the confession must be credible, and the testimony concerning non-spectral acts of witchcraft must be by at least two persons of good character, and must either expressly or inferentially reflect actions accomplished with the aid of Satan." (Craker 1997, 336) Thus, even if a group of accusers claimed to see the shape of the accused and assigned to that specter various claims of bedevilment, Cotton Mather argued that, as much as the spectral evidence should be believed, other forms of verification were required. Increase Mather, Cotton's father, went even further. Interestingly, Increase Mather had argued as early as 1684 that spectral evidence, taken in sole consultation in establishing a witch's guilt, was not to be trusted.

(Harley 1996, 315) Increase was more vocal in his belief that spectral evidence was not a valid form of substantiation of a person's status as a witch, although he did not deny that specters could appear. "A Man that is in one place cannot . . .

at the Same time be in another." (Mather 1693, B2) The radical shift in attitude evident in Increase Mather's writings and sermons during the summer and fall of 1692 is not a denial of the Devil taking the form of one with whom he has contracted, but that the Devil may actually take the form of an innocent—and even a righteous—person." The First Case that I am desired to express my Judgment in, is this, Whether it is not Possible for the Devil to impose on the Imaginations of Persons Bewitched, and to cause them to Believe that an Innocent, yea that a Pious person do's torment them, when the Devil himself doth it, or whether Satan may not appear in the Shape of an Innocent and Pious, as well as of a Nocent and Wicked Person to Afflict such as suffer by Diabolical Malefactions?" (Mather 1693, 1) Mather's answer is an unequivocal "yes"—the Devil could take the shape of an innocent person. In supporting this position, Mather cites what might be considered the ultimate source of all truth in Puritan New England—the Bible. He uses the story of Samuel and Saul, stating that the reader could conclude that it was not the real Samuel who appeared to Saul in the story, and thus the Devil had taken the form not simply of an innocent or pious person, but of a saint.

Consequently, the argument continued, if the Devil could take the shape of a saint (with God's permission, of course), then the Devil could appear in the shape of anyone. Increase Mather considered the only acceptable proof for <https://assignbuster.com/salem-spectral-evidence-and-recovered-memory-syndrome/>

execution for witchcraft of a person so accused to be a confession—a true confession. Man, Mather believed, could never know all the deceptions of the Devil. “ Having rejected the validity of the testimony of confessed witches, spectral evidence, and the ordeal of sight and touch, and having pointed out the superior powers of Satan compared to man, Mather goes on to describe how witches can in fact be discovered: ‘[only] a free and Voluntary Confession of the Crime . . .

is a sufficient ground of Conviction.” (Callis 2005, 189) In absence of a voluntary confession of witchcraft, Mather asserted, the rooting out of true witches was nearly impossible. “ Increase Mather also takes pains to stress that an easy detection of witchcraft is impossible because Satan is far too powerful for his wiles to be easily discovered by the investigations of men: ‘ His [Satan’s] art is beyond what the wisest of men may pretend unto.’”

(Callis 2005, 188) Traditional measures of a witch’s identity, to Mather, were extremely unreliable. How can a mere man know the limits of God’s allowance to the Devil? During the trials, a group of ministers led by Mather issued a statement urging the moderate use of spectral evidence and casting doubt on its reliability in detecting witches. It was of no use.

“ In a pattern that would be repeated several times during the trials, the judges at Salem disregarded all caveats regarding the use of spectral evidence, particularly where corroborating evidence was called for.” (Payne 1993, 69) While it is important to note that no one was executed during the Salem witch trials using spectral evidence that did not also have corroborating proof, those hearing the charges of accused witches continued to rely on the word of a group claiming visions no one else could see. In <https://assignbuster.com/salem-spectral-evidence-and-recovered-memory-syndrome/>

1693, Increase Mather published one of his most famous works, *Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits Personating Men, Witchcrafts, Infallible Proofs of Guilt in Such as are Accused with that Crime*. While there are several important ideas Mather sets forth, such as the aforementioned “devil in the shape of an innocent person,” another critical proposal involves the need for corroborating evidence and denying the value of spectral evidence as a sole attestation.

“ This notwithstanding, I will add; It were better that Ten Suspected Witches should escape, than that one Innocent Person should be Condemned . . . It is better that a Guilty Person should be ABSOLVED, than he should without sufficient ground of Conviction be condemned. I had rather judge a Witch to be an honest woman, than judge an honest woman as a witch.

” (Mather 1693, 66) Such was the value Increase Mather placed on determining beyond doubt a person’s guilt or innocence that he would allow a guilty person to go free if there was even the smallest chance an innocent person would be convicted and condemned. It is a shame Increase Mather was not alive in the late 20th century. Perhaps he could have shown us alarming parallels between the use of spectral evidence to seal the fate of accused witches in Salem and the accusations leveled by (mostly) women of sexual abuse through the repressed and recovered memories movement. I am a sexual abuse survivor.

I felt it important divulge this information for many reasons, the foremost having to do with any potential bias my coverage of this subject may produce. Surprisingly, however, any bias might not surface as one might

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expect. The aftereffects of my situation are many, and I cannot even begin to list them due to the brevity of this paper or their relevance in complete and absolute terms. It is sufficient to say, however, that while I have on many, many occasions attempted to block those instances from my mind, I live with those experiences daily, and their occurrence at a point in my past dramatically and irrevocably has altered the course of my life.

It is through this knowledge, therefore, I approach the subject of repressed/recovered memories with some doubt and hesitation. To begin, it is important to note the difference between repressed memories and those which have been recovered. A repressed memory is one in which the person has made a conscious and determined effort to block from his or her mind, such as I just mentioned. The person is well aware the event happened, but he or she chooses to pretend it does not exist.

A recovered memory, however, is a bit more complex. The recovered memory theory holds that, due to some traumatic event, a memory is pushed so far down into the subconscious that the person ceases to remember the event ever even existed. Memories may only be recovered in a situation such as therapy, with a therapist acting as a guide to discover the initial trauma all over again. It is recovered memories specifically which can be paralleled to Salem. The first connection between the Salem trials and the issue of recovered memories is in the realm of the Devil. Puritans of New England during the time of the Salem witch trials viewed the idea of witches as inseparable from that of the Devil and his works of evil on the world.

As with Salem, the recovered memory movement has also had its share of dealings with Satan. Take, for instance, the case of Paul Ingram of Olympia, Washington. His daughters had been encouraged to “recover” memories of sexual abuse. When confronted by detectives, Mr. Ingram “came to believe that he must have molested his daughters—despite his inability to remember any abuse—because of his religious belief that satanic deception causes the mind to repress immoral conduct, as well as his conviction that his daughters could not possibly lie about such things.” (Leo 1997, 655) Mr.

Ingram went on to “remember” details of the satanic cult of which he was the high priest, oaths signed in blood, and the cannibalization of small children. (Leo 1997, 656) Ultimately, it was acknowledged that none of these things had happened, but Mr. Ingram fully accepted that they had. After all, as with Salem, no one can possibly know what the Devil may do. The case of Mr. Ingram brings up two additional interesting points and counterparts.

First, as the Ingram case unfolded, the proliferation of increasingly bizarre accusations was almost unstoppable. Each successive “memory” produced an allegation even more peculiar than the last. This trend is discussed extensively in a book by Moira Johnston: *Spectral Evidence: The Ramona Case*. Considered a landmark legal case in the recovered memory field, the Ramona case showcases how the progression of alleged violations became more and more out of the ordinary—and out of the range of believability. Gary Ramona, highly successful businessman, had been accused by his daughter, Holly, of sexual abuse and incest.

Holly, a troubled young woman, suffered from depression and bulimia. Going off to college brought things to a climax, and she began seeing a therapist concerning her eating disorders. Holly's therapist seemingly steered her into believing that the root cause of her eating problems was the fact her father had sexually abused her during her childhood. In the repressed/recovered memory movement, this was not an unusual development.

“ These robustly repressed memories of childhood sexual trauma are believed to be the source of the patient's current anxiety, distress or afflictions.” (Leo 1997, 657) Holly demanded a “ truth serum,” and, upon the “ successful” completion of questioning under the influence of the serum, confronted her father about the abuse. Holly's unsubstantiated accusations were damaging enough, but now “ flashbacks” continued to surface at random times, and they became more and more disturbing. The age at which Holly said she was abused went from 5 to 7 years of age all the way up to 16 years of age—an unbelievable amount of time to “ forget” you had been sexually abused by your father. Additionally, Holly accused Gary of dalliances with her sisters as well, and, in a shocking disclosure, said Gary had not only had a sexual relationship with their dog, Prince, but that he had forced Holly to have one as well.

The move from accusation to stranger accusation to an accusation that strains credulity is a hallmark not only of the recovered memory debate, but it can also be tied to Salem as well. The first of the accused witches were those in the villages one might suspect naturally of witchcraft—the old, the antisocial, the ones who might practice a sort of herbal medicine. As time

went on, however, the group of girls “ in charge” of naming witches began to extend the boundaries. Eventually, those in charge came to their senses.

“ Historians have offered a number of reasons for this sudden change: accusations against people of unblemished reputation, and of high standing bred doubts about the testimony of afflicted accusers; leading ministers, like Increase Mather, questioned with increasing boldness the court’s reliance on spectral evidence; families of the accused as well as influential secular leaders like Calef, publicly and privately undercut the testimony, evidence and assumptions that propped up the witch hunters’ authority; confessed witches began to recant; and officials began to discourage the issuance of arrest warrants.” (Latner 2008, 148) In Ramona, Holly’s fierce defense of these strange claims may have sealed her fate. In a landmark move, Gary sued Holly’s therapist and doctor for the damage to his reputation, the loss of his job, and the loss of his marriage. While the trial was Gary against the medical establishment who had coerced Holly into what he claimed was a false belief, it was clear that it really concerned whether those on the jury believed Holly (that she had been abused by Gary) or Gary (that Holly had falsely accused him of abuse). In the end, several jurors could not reconcile Holly’s outrageous claims of bestiality and, along with other rationalizations, found in favor of Gary.

I have already touched on the second point I would like to make regarding the case of Mr. Ingram, the case of Ms. Ramona, and the issues connecting them and other recovered memory cases to Salem: suggestibility and coercion. The girls accusing their neighbors and the village folk in Salem were no less immune to the power of suggestion than those who claim to <https://assignbuster.com/salem-spectral-evidence-and-recovered-memory-syndrome/>

have recovered memories of sexual abuse. The initial accused in Salem were what one might think of as “witch-like.” However, as time went on, the girls involved with naming witches became under the influence of their parents, their minister, and even the court itself in determining which person should be arrested next.

This same principle is alive and well today. In the case of Mr. Ingram, “Once removed from daily interrogations, however, Ingram immediately recanted his confessions, realizing that his visualizations had been entirely the product of coercive suggestion and fantasy.” (Leo 1997, 656) Therapists themselves can also lead the way.

As recovered memories are retrieved, “. . . Therapists persuade their patients to interpret hypnotically generated images, gut feelings, vague memory flashes, dreams and imaginings as valid memories. Once this process has begun, the goal of therapy becomes to extract every possible fragment of the long-buried memories of abuse because therapists believe that patients will ‘heal’ only after the previously nonexistent memories have been fully excavated, relived, and then overcome.

” (Leo 1997, 657) Holly Ramona was under the direct influence of her therapist when, in a highly suggestible, emotional state, she was led to “remember” abuse that had never occurred. Distortions become truth to the person seeking answers in recovered memories. However, “. . . memories can be distorted, molded to recall details that were either wrong or nonexistent, and even made to incorporate characters and events that never existed.

” (Leo 1997, 662) It is also important to note that once something has been determined to be “ true,” it is hard to give that idea up. “ A falsehood can acquire the strength of a conviction once the consequences of being found out have escalated.” (Crews 1997, 36) The young girls who made up most of the group naming witches during the trials in Salem certainly could attest to this notion. At what point do things get out of hand? Where is the point of no return? Even if you know something is not true, when the stakes become so high that the risk of actually telling an accurate account or version becomes too dangerous, it is quite easy to suddenly believe in the accuracy of the falsehood. One of the most important similarities between the Salem witch trials and the recovered memory movement, of course, lies in the total lack of empirical evidence in both cases.” The similarities between the recovered memory phenomenon of the late 20th century and the witchhunts of earlier eras initially appear quite striking.

In both instances, numerous individuals were accused of imaginary crimes, presumed guilty, and persecuted—all in the absence of any corroborating evidence and despite much disconfirming evidence.” (Leo 1997, 673) How do you prove you see a specter, when no one else can view it? How do you prove you have been sexually abused, if there is no physical evidence and no witnesses? “ Under close scrutiny, potential criteria for evidence, such as corroborating witnesses, physical evidence of abuse, and believability of a story, become highly problematic.” (Sturken 1998, 105) He said/she said. The girls said/the accused witches said. The judges in Salem had difficulty in determining the “ true” evidence to be considered when discussing witchcraft.

Are our judges today any better off trying to determine the “ true” evidence to be used when discussing sexual abuse? There is much on the line in both situations. “ Thousands of parents have been accused (and presumed guilty) of unspeakably abusive acts that almost certainly did not occur, and in the process have seen their families shattered, their reputations ruined, their finances depleted, and their adult children forever lost to the recovery movement.” (Leo 1997, 688) Believe the Child. A bumper sticker slogan in the 1980s and into the 1990s, the premise is that we should believe a child if he or she reveals a shocking truth, no matter how incredulous we might be in our initial reaction. This was also evident for those with recovered memories, as the public was encouraged to believe the memories of adults who had repressed memories of abusive childhoods.

Conversely, we can see a similar situation in Salem, where it was seemingly easy for those in charge of hearings to “ believe the child.” “ Hathorne and Corwin abandoned all pretense of impartiality and unquestioningly took the word of the girls who seemed to suffer so horribly right before their eyes.” (Payne 1993, 69) The girls in Salem enjoyed ultimate power over the accusing of witches, at least for a short time. This is one more area that can be seen in the sexual abuse accusations of the last 30 years. Recovering a memory as shocking as one in which you have been used or taken advantage of, especially by someone close to you, can be a powerful feeling. “ These ‘ memories’ impart a feeling of importance and specialness, even a sense of adventure. A patient may have felt deprived or ignored as a child, or perhaps felt unexceptional because nothing exciting or unusual ever happened to him. . .

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Their elaborate pseudomemories help them to feel special and worthy of a therapist's attention, even fascination." (Johnston 1997, 159) Like the accusatory group in Salem, those with recovered memories now enjoy a special status. Feminism enjoys a special status within the realm of recovered memories. " In legal academia, the school of feminism which holds that men tend towards sexual predatoriness and domination of women as victims is often denominated " dominance feminism." Its proponents believe that male sexual aggression is the main fault line in society." (Greer 1998) Feminists claim that sexual abuse is far, far more prevalent than ever imagined, and it is the dominance of the male that is the root cause of this devastation of women.

Salem, too, was not free charges by feminists, who readily point out that nearly all of those accused and executed were women. Puritan New England was a male-dominated society, they say, and look where that got women in Salem. As in Salem, those accused of unspeakable acts of sexual abuse have little defense on which they can rely. When spectral evidence was used in Salem, it resulted in a situation " where the accused had no means of rebutting the charged leveled against them." (Payne 1993, 62) In fact, " The very nature of spectral evidence would have presented nearly insurmountable barriers to an effective defense, but this was made worse by the disinclination of the court to permit any real cross-examination of the witnesses or to cross-examine the accusers themselves.

" (Payne 1993, 77)Defendants today, of course, enjoy legal and procedural rights not afforded to accused witches in Salem: the right to be represented by counsel, the right to appeal, the right to cross-examine witnesses, among <https://assignbuster.com/salem-spectral-evidence-and-recovered-memory-syndrome/>

others. However, the ease by which innocent people may be accused of crimes they did not commit has not changed completely." The witch hunt—a modern-day counterpart to the Salem witch trials in the 1600s—could not have happened without the destruction of evidentiary standards by federal law. As the result of the Child Abuse and Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 as expanded over the decades, no parent, grandparent or child-care provider is safe from false accusations." (Roberts 1998, 18) No one is safe—another lesson learned in Salem applicable to today. " Not surprisingly, individuals who are almost certainly innocent have been prosecuted, convicted, and incarcerated for felony crimes solely on the basis of uncorroborated ' repressed' memories that did not come into existence until many years later.

" (Leo 1997, 687) Without outside, empirical confirmation, what is to stop your son, your daughter, your neighbor, your friend from alleging unspeakable acts? " If this family could be struck, all were at risk." (Johnston 1997, 4) " If the perfect family was vulnerable, we all were." (Johnston 1997, 10) Both of these statements are sentiments found in the study of the Ramona case, but similar thoughts could be expressed about Salem. Spectral evidence is shifty.

If the Devil could take the form of an innocent person, how are we to know the truth at all? If the Devil can appear as your friend, your neighbor—or your father, is anyone safe? When you question what you know of guilt and innocence, all evidence must be closely examined, and when the stakes are high and the future success and happiness (or, in the case of Salem, a life) hangs in the balance, one must be absolutely sure. " The Word of God
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directs men not to proceed to the Execution of the most capital offenders, until such time as upon searching diligently the matter is found to be a Truth, and the thing certain." (Mather 1693, 67)