

The salem witchcraft trials research paper

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



Arthur Miller wrote 'The Crucible' in order to critic a period in history.

Society substituted fact and reason with fear and irrationality to solve its problems. Nineteen people lost their lives owing to the Salem witch trials.

However, this appalling occurrence was in the history of the people of Salem; it was not an isolated incident.

During the 16th and seventeenth century, people in the New England colony were highly religious. Puritanism was the main religion among this close-knit community. Furthermore, most of the adherents believed that forces of evil and purity prevailed in like measure, in the world. They claimed that natural catastrophes, diseases and ill fortune were manifestations of supernatural forces. Therefore, this thinking caused Salem residents to believe in witches and wizards as agents of the devil.

New England had recorded witchcraft cases before. In fact, a reputable member of this community had written a book known as 'Memorable Providence' in 1689 (Hoffer 78). The author of the books was Cotton Mather, and he wrote about certain episodes of witchcraft that took place in the previous year. In the piece, he describes a washerwoman – Goody Glover – who was a typical witch. His accounts became a household name in Puritan New England. Even Samuel Parris; the Salem clergyman had the book in his household library.

These thoughts enforced the belief in the existence of witchcraft in New England. They also demystified the rituals that witches and wizards used in the practice. Additionally, some cases existed even in Europe. However, these beliefs had started to fade in that continent during the mid

seventeenth century. Therefore, these strong belief systems inspired the Salem witch craft trails.

A few years prior to the events of the Salem witch trials, the community suffered from an attack of smallpox. Many people did not know how to interpret these misfortunes and readily accepted supernatural intervention as one of the explanations. Such tendencies set the pace for later acceptance of the same justification in the witchcraft trials.

The political landscape at the time was highly volatile. The people of New England were in the middle of a war with the Indians. The British settlers had lived in that part of the world for approximately seventy years. Furthermore, they were not doing especially well in the war. If this poor performance continued, it was likely that New Englanders would accuse their administrators of incompetence. Senior reporters needed a scapegoat that would divert attention away from their inadequacies in the war. The people who others accused of witchcraft served as an avenue for diffusing the tensions that arose out of the poor performance in the wars. This was the reason why judges were quite eager to sentence them even when little or no evidence existed.

In relation to the frontier wars at the time, Salem Village also contended with congregational strife. A certain degree of factionalism existed in Salem village as some people supported Parris and these were the Pro-Parris camp while others belonged to the anti-Parris camp. In 1688, a man known as Samuel Parris arrived in Salem Village upon invitation by John Putnam. The latter was a highly influential elder in the community.

One year later, the leaders requested Parris to move to their community and take on the responsibilities of a minister in the Village. He accepted this invitation and moved with his family. Little did he know that he would fuel a split between various camps in the community. At the time, the Village witnessed a rise in mercantile classes. Two clans wanted to control the town, and they were the Porters and the Putnams. Since Putnam invited Parris to the Village, then the Putnam clan fell in the Parris camp while the Porters fell in the anti-Parris faction.

The two groups also debated about the center of trade in their community. Some wanted the area's economy to focus more on agriculture areas such as Salem Village; others wanted it to dwell on sea trade, away from the Village. These divisions continued up to and including the Salem witch trials. At the time, the girls were no longer relevant in the unfolding scene; they became pawns that adults used to achieve their own ends (Cooley 44). The parties read their own expectations and concerns from the trials.

They accused members of the opposite camps of witchcraft in order to resolve their personal differences. At first, non supporters of the Parris camp bore the brunt of this injustice by becoming the first defendants in the witch trials. However, it later became apparent that anti-Parris members could also use this platform to settle their political scores, and that is exactly what happened to their opponents in the witch trails.

The judicial system in New England was in its infancy. In fact, many participants did not know how to separate their religious beliefs from the actual judicial process. The court system was such that defendants had

minimal rights. The system did not guarantee defendants legal counsel. Furthermore, they had no right to bring in their own witnesses. New England had no mechanisms for appeal at the time, so it was difficult to look for legal redress in case one went through an unfair trial. The only rights that defendants had was to defend their actions as well as produce their own evidence or ask accusers questions.

It was these systems that carried on into the Salem witchcraft trials. The judges felt that it was permissible to use spectral evidence in the examinations even when this was an unreliable source of proof. Spectral evidence is a testimony given by witchcraft accusers who claim to have seen a suspect's specter. It was only after the witchcraft hysteria ceased that the judges openly admitted to having faulted in the dispensation of their duties. This was the reason why they abandoned the method at the end of the trials. When the judges only relied upon non spectral or concrete evidence, they freed all the accused persons.

The manipulations of the witnesses and the accused persons further testify to the weaknesses of the court system at the time. The authorities promised suspects life if they confessed to the crime of witchcraft. Many of them succumbed to this pressure because they wanted to save themselves. In fact, it was only Giles Corey who refused to either say no or yes to the accusations that the town made against him.

He asserted that he did not want to ruin his name and his children's future by confessing to the crime. The judges that presided over the Salem trials were extremely sadistic as they caused people to confess to crimes that they

had not committed or sentenced them to hang if they denied the accusations (DeRosa 15).

It should be noted that, during the trial process, a number of events led to the tragedy that befell the suspects. First, many people confessed to the accusations in order to save their lives; the punishment that they received was imprisonment. Prisons in Salem filled to capacity and the town's administrators had no way of dealing with the excess capacity.

The situation warranted fast action; Governor Phips, who had just come back from Britain, made a series of changes that further weakened the judicial system. He appointed a new court called Oyer and Terminer to deal with the witchcraft cases. All five judges chosen for the court process were close acquaintances of Cotton Mather (he had written a lot about witchcraft practices). Already, this was a group that had a bias against the suspects. One of the members of this five-judge bench was William Stoughton. He was a friend to Mather, who urged him to use spectral evidence in the cases.

The judges did not have any legal training in witchcraft issues when they carried out their judgments. Furthermore, many of them asked for their Church Ministers' guidance throughout this process. The ministers involved in the trial continued to use outrageous methods in the process such as the examination of witch marks and the touching test (Miller 16).

The latter involved an analysis of whether the accused could stop contortions in the patients. The judicial process was so wretched that it used hearsay, unsupported testimonies and gossip to pass judgment against the accused.

The ineptness of the judicial process before and during the trials led to the hanging of nineteen people.

A number of factors contributed towards the grave injustices of the Salem trials. First, people of the Village were deeply religious and believed in the intervention of Satan and God in their daily lives. Additionally, the social and economic conditions that existed at the time caused them to apportion blame to ‘agents of the devil’, who were the accused witches. Furthermore, many of them used the trials as a platform for settling political scores. Additionally, New England’s judicial system was absolutely inept.

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