

Salem witch trials in the crucible

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The Salem witch trials were the persecution, imprisonment, and hanging of people with supposed allegiance to the devil as witches. The trials are illustrated in Arthur Miller's film *The Crucible*. The accusations began in 1692 in the strict Puritan society of Salem, Massachusetts.

A group of teenage girls was caught fortune telling with the slave Tituba. They began to show strange symptoms like fever. Some girls were not able to wake up. A doctor said their illness stemmed from dark magic. Parents wanted to punish whoever was hurting their daughters.

The girls blamed their condition on Tituba and accused her of witchcraft. They continued having hysterical fits and other symptoms to raise more charges. By the end of that year the town jail held over 200 people accused of witchcraft from one small town. Salem was changed forever. Puritan worldviews, town and class tensions, gender tensions, and Indian wars caused the Salem witch trials. Arthur Miller's film *The Crucible* touched upon all four main causes of the trials, with less focus on the theme of the Indian wars.

Puritan fear of the devil and non-conformity were the foundation of the trials. In Salem's theocracy no one could rebel against the town ministers, so Puritan worldviews were forced on everyone. Puritans believed Satan was at work among them and wanted witches to do his evil. These witches would show visible indicators, give their victims strange symptoms, and target children (Puritan Beliefs). With the devil among them on earth, it was the Puritans' job to search for signs of dissonance among each other to identify this evil (Puritan Beliefs).

Spectral evidence was the idea that witches could send out their spirits to do dark magic without physically leaving their home or even their bed (Puritan Beliefs). This provided the perfect excuse to accuse people without evidence. This prevented fair trials because people could be accused when they were out of town. The town court was packed with loud, shaking, teenage girls (Collins). The girls responded to doubt of their testimony with tantrums, yelling that the accused had issued a specter to physically torment them (Collins). This hysteria over spectral evidence was well illustrated in *The Crucible* when the accusing girls pretended Mary Warren was attacking them in the form of a yellow bird from the rafters (*Crucible*).

Strong Puritan beliefs were shown throughout the film as respected leaders and townspeople took the stream of absurd accusations serious. Puritan worldviews like fear of the devil on earth and non-conformity were the origin of the preposterous trials. Town and class tensions motivated the trials. The trials were a chance for poor town members to strike out at the upper class (*Witchcraft*). When the Putnam family's money ran out, they lost their status in town and became jealous of wealthy, powerful families (Collins). They slandered everyone who surpassed them in town standing.

Class tensions were not the only cause of hostility. An easy way to get rid of personal enemies was to accuse them. The Putnams were quintessential accusers because they cried witchcraft against everyone in town they did not like. They pursued people they held personal grudges against. For example, they had been in a legal conflict with Sarah Osborne, an ill and middle-aged lady who they accused (Collins).

In total the Putnams accused forty-six people of witchcraft (Collins). The Putnams were the perfect tableau of the release of town tensions through accusations in *The Crucible*. Thomas Putnam blamed John Proctor for stealing his lumber (*The Crucible*). Giles Corey objected that the Putnams did not really own this land and had also tried to steal the Coreys' land (*The Crucible*). The Putnams had a clear history of greed for land (*The Crucible*). Corey claimed Thomas Putnam pressured his daughter to accuse Mr.

Jacobs of witchcraft so his land would be relinquished for sale (*The Crucible*). Giles Corey was pressed to death and Mr. Jacobs was hanged for witchcraft. This exemplifies a punitive trial driven by squabbles over property. The trials peaked as people tapped into such wretched opportunities.

Disagreements within the congregation left some with bitter feelings. The best revenge was to accuse one's enemy of witchcraft because they were thrown in jail and then hanged if they did not confess. The trials were motivated by class tensions and social stress in town. Gender tensions inflamed the trials by embittering the accusers. Women were inferior members of the community until they were married (Collins).

Study of the Bible was typically the only reason a woman learned to read, and that was the extent of her education (Collins). Even upper class women became servants to develop their skills in the home and learn to submit to authority (Collins). Once the girls had established their influence as witnesses they issued prompt accusations left and right to maintain the only power the teenage girls could have in Salem. Mary Warren was the specimen of a young girl enthralled by this power in the film. Mary was eighteen years

old but still single and dependant (The Crucible). She had no power until she cried witchcraft against a large number of people (The Crucible).

Then she was made an official of the court (The Crucible). The undesirable, low role of women in society motivated girls like Mary to grab for power in this way. The trials intensified as the number of accusations increased. Strict gender roles exacerbated the trials. Indian Wars were grave to the trials because they swept belligerent attitudes and panic through New England. The Puritans had endured many hardships in Indian wars.

Everyone in town knew someone who had died in the wars. Many had lost their homes and livestock because of the conflict (Norton). Instead of blaming leaders, the Puritans believed lost wars were a punishment from god (Norton). They were still in the midst of King William's war, so god must not have forgiven them. This took a huge psychological toll on the Puritans.

They became hypervigilant to other forms of punishment. They believed if they became better Christians then god would not desert them again (Norton). They kept their eyes peeled for Satan. Indians were associated with the devil. The presence of the devil meant the presence of witchcraft.

Witches were perceived as another layer of God's punishments during the war. This fostered warlike attitudes against witchcraft among the townspeople. They panicked and had an irrational, violent response to the accusations. Abigail Williams exemplified this malice in The Crucible. She threatened Mary and Mercy, " I have seen Indians smash my dear parents' heads on the pillow beside me, and I have seen some reddish work done at

night, and I can make you wish you had never seen the sun go down!" (The Crucible).

Abigail herself was a refugee. She described the bloodshed she had seen, and how it made her numb to brutality. She was unafraid to hurt innocent people because of the destruction she had witnessed, so she continued to charge harmless town members of witchcraft. This was mentioned only once in the film, but it was a crucial scene. Abigail revealed the motivations for her malevolent actions. The Indian wars were vital to the trials because they spread fear and violent attitudes.

Arthur Miller's film The Crucible depicted four prime sources of the Salem trials. Fear of the devil and non-conformity were Puritan views that underpinned the charges. Class and town tensions compelled false accusations. Gender tensions heightened the trials as girls cried witchcraft for power. Indian wars were the roots of warlike attitudes that prompted society's forceful response. The trials ended when the girls began to accuse influential and admired people (Puritan Beliefs).

This took a toll on their credibility. When the wife of Governor Phips was charged, the Governor forbid the use of spectral evidence (Puritan Beliefs). Without spectral evidence, there was no solid evidence at all. No one believed the girls' rants. The Puritans realized too many innocent people had been put to death. In May of 1663, the remaining accused were pardoned.

At that point nineteen had been hanged to death, thirteen died in prison, and one man was pressed to death. The community was suffering. Fortunately, the Salem witch trials had come to an end.

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