
Salem Witch Trials - Motivation In History

Salem Massachusetts, colonial United states, 1692. A young country still growing and unsteady. A place for the unwanted in England, a place of refuge. Among other outcasts there were the Puritans, a group of people that practiced puritanism. They lived their lives directly through the bible. Their ministers and priests held more power than the government. Their religion strongly believed in witches and witchcraft, that the devil was always lurking. If there was a bad harvest, illness or storms they would blame witches and the devil. A few accusations started appearing throughout the town, people being possessed and dealing with the devil. This caused mass hysteria to spread wildly.

It all began in the spring of 1692, when a group of young girls were caught in the woods. They said they were possessed by the devil, they accused several women of being witches and enchanting them. This causes a wave of hysteria to sweep across Salem and surrounding towns. It began with Elizabeth Parris and Abigail Williams being diagnosed that they had been bewitched. Soon after other girls in the village also began to show symptoms of "bewitchment", such as uncontrollable outbursts, odd speech and fits of screaming. The girls and their families blamed Tituba, a slave and homeless woman, Sarah Good and also the elderly, childless Sarah Osborne. Notice all these women were of the lower class of people at the time, used as a scapegoat. The trials soon began to overwhelm the court system so William Phips, the new governor established a new Court of Oyer to rule over witchcraft cases. Eventually nineteen people were hanged after being accused of practicing witchcraft. Around 150 other people were accused, in 1693 May Phips pardoned and therefore released all people imprisoned under witchcraft charges. But it wasn't until 1711 when the good names were restored for those convicted. The effects of such a panic are still riddled throughout the town of Salem, Massachusetts to this day.

There were a multitude of outside factors that all mixed together to allow something as horrifying as these trials were to occur. To begin, the primary religion practiced in Salem and surrounding towns was Puritanism; An extremely strict and unforgiving religion that was strongly superstitious. They believed that if they if you sinned even once you were condemned to hell, that is a lot of pressure, constantly walking on eggshells. So when young girls started behaving oddly, they claimed to have been possessed by witches, I believe because they were afraid of the consequences that would come if they were being honest and just came forward about what they were actually doing the woods.

Practicing Puritanism means you must live in a heightened sense of awareness of all of your actions. I believe there must immense pressure to never do wrong, so if you were caught in a

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sin you would try to blame it on something else, to make it not your fault. I also believe that what caused this to blow so out of proportion and so quickly was hate. Once the trials started getting attention and people were being thrown in jail, neighbor would accuse neighbor because of disputes and feuds, not because they actual belief of practicing witchcraft. They knew if they accused them they would be shunned and suffer the consequences even if they weren't convicted. Something else to keep in mind was the first three women accused of being witches were a slave, a beggar and an elderly poor woman, three easy targets. If you admitted to practicing witchcraft and came forward, you were spared your life, you had to live in prison but you could at least, live. But if there was a trial and you were convicted but continued to stress your innocence you would be hanged. So Tituba, most likely coming forward to save her own life, confessed. While the other two originally accused women denied their guilt. But Tituba, said there were others among her, she most likely said this to get a less severe jail sentence. There is also very convincing evidence of ergot poisoning, Ergot is a type of fungus that infects rye and thrives in warm swampy conditions, and according to the reports and diaries of Salem residents at the time it fits the conditions perfectly. This fungus causes symptoms such as muscle spasms, hallucinations and a few others, all coincidentally are present at the time of the "bewitchings". This could give an explanation behind why people were so afraid.

They were really were exhibiting symptoms that would certainly look like they were being possessed. It would give a very convincing sense of danger and especially to a kind of people who believe in these superstitions so wholeheartedly. I believe that the people in Salem had their reasons to be so afraid and act as they did. Now, what they did was horrific and wrong, but I believe the motivations behind everything were justified at the time. They did not have access to the type of information and science we do now. If the ergot poisoning actually happened that would give real convincing evidence of possessions. They would have had no other explanations, at the time besides witchcraft. In a community with a religion as strict and unforgiving as Puritanism caused the citizens were brainwashed and scared for their lives now and being sent to Hell in the afterlife. Giving the perfect environment for such fear and hate to grow out of control. Now fast forward to early 1950s U. S. A, there's a cold war standoff between the U. S and Soviet Russia, in an event known as the Red Scare.

There was much fear that communist Soviet spies would infiltrate the United States and hold a serious threat to U. S security. There were executive orders and committees made to try and weed out and discover if there were any communist sympathizers working in the U. S government. There were blacklists created for many other industries, saying not to hire certain people because they might have been accused of being communist. U. S. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy pushed himself to the forefront of the anti communist battle. He would accuse celebrities and other political figures to destroy their reputation and careers. He abused his power to knock down his political competition, to take advantage of the climate of fear and untrust among political figures and U. S citizens. This compares to the Salem witch trials

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because as people around the community of Salem were accusing others of being witches the same thing was paralleled in early 1950s. With people living in fear that communism was going to take over their country. People were afraid of being wiretapped and feared being under surveillance.

The motivations of certain political figures at the time also parallels how citizens of Salem treated each other. They would accuse for personal gain or hate rather than actual suspicion. They say history has a tendency to repeat itself, from back in the time when witches were thought to be terrorizing a town in colonial United states to a communist hunt in the 1950s. People will continue to be motivated by fear and hate for the rest of history, its human nature. What we can try to change is letting those motivations cloud our judgement of right and wrong. History continues to pay its respects to the 19 people put to death at Salem, a mistake that still hangs over the town to this day. Something good we can hope to count on is learning from our past mistakes, and let our motivations guide us towards doing good in the future. There's nothing we can do to change the past to stop the fear, hysteria, pain and suffering. What we can do is continue to learn from our mistakes, and let our motivations guide us towards doing good in the future.

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