Introduction to the Salem Witch Trials

The Salem witchcraft outbreak of 1692 was one of the most notorious incidents in the history of colonial America. It was a local incident that evolved into the largest witch hunt in American history. The story we have of the trials is based on legal examinations, indictments, and depositions regarding the accused witches.

“The Devil has been raised amongst us, and his rage is vehement and terrible, and when he shall be silenced the Lord only knows.” So wrote Rev. Samuel Parris, the pastor of Salem Village, in his church record book in late March 1692 when confronted with what was discovered to be a diabolical occurrence taking place in this small Massachusetts town.

Witch hunts had been a fairly common occurrence in Europe, but were becoming less frequent by 1692. Many historians have tried to explain the causes of the Salem witch trials. First-hand witnesses such as John Hale and Cotton Mather saw these events as the direct intervention of the Devil attacking the Puritan Commonwealth, being partially successful because of the religious “backsliding” of the New Englanders and the use of ill-conceived traditions and non-biblical principles to discover who was a witch. Later historians have suggested the following causes:

1. The pranks of bored adolescents
2. The influence of power-hungry church leaders
3. Local petty jealousies and land grabs
4. Mental instability among the victims and/or the town in general
5. The practice of “white magic” brought from England
6. Political instability among the colonies and towns
7. A conspiracy to scare people so they would remain faithful Puritans
8. Mass hysteria
9. Physical symptoms resulting from a reaction to ingesting a certain type of fungus.

At the time of the trials, the average Puritan in Europe or settling in America believed in the existence of a literal Devil and in the possibility of witchcraft. Witches were thought to be humans, typically (but not exclusively) women, who had agreed to serve the Devil. In return for favors and certain amazing powers from the Devil, they attempted to bring ruin upon the Christian community.

On continental Europe beginning in the 15th century, literally tens of thousands of “witches” had been discovered and put to death. There, witchcraft was considered a heresy against the church, and heretics were burned at the stake. In England, witchcraft became a crime punishable by death in the mid-sixteenth century, and an estimated one-thousand witches were found and hanged between then and the end of the 17th century. Witchcraft was considered a felony against the state in England, and felons were hanged. Witch hunts in England tended to coincide with social or political strife, such as during the Civil War when in less than two years in the mid 1640s about 200 witches were executed.
The English settlers of 17th century New England did on occasion find witchcraft at work within their various communities, and although a large-scale witch outbreak did not occur prior to 1692, over 90 individual complaints and accusations took place before that date.

Salem, Massachusetts, was a large town, first occupied by Englishmen in 1626. When land was no longer available in Salem, a group of settlers established homesteads to the west, some five to ten miles from the center of Salem. This area soon became known as Salem Village, and included a substantial collection of widely scattered farms. In 1667, Salem Village farmers petitioned to be exempted from military watches in Salem, and then began a movement toward independence from their mother community. Salem, of course, did not want to lose the tax revenue the farmers provided, and resisted the movement.

Salem Village turned to the General Court for relief, petitioning for permission at least to build their own meeting house and hire a minister to preach among them. This request was granted in 1672, but Salem Village did not gain true independence until the 1750s, when it became the town of Danvers.

From 1672 to 1688, the ministers who served in Salem Village were James Bayley, George Burroughs, and Deodat Lawson. Each of these served short terms, being unable to gain the support of more than a simple majority of the congregation, and eventually gave up the fight and left the village. A 1682 letter written by villager Jeremiah Watts reveals the division in the congregation: “Brother is against brother and neighbors against neighbors, all quarreling and smiting one another.”

By 1689 the villagers, in a seemingly unusual spirit of cooperation, pushed hard for a completely independent church, and at the same time hired Samuel Parris as their new minister. On November 19, 1689, the request was granted from the Salem mother church, and Mr. Samuel Parris was ordained pastor of the newly created and independent Church of Christ at Salem Village, with twenty-seven adult church members.

Thirty-five-year-old Samuel Parris negotiated a smaller salary than his three predecessors, but managed to convince the church to give him full ownership of the parsonage and its two-acre lot. This angered some of the church members, who saw the agreement as an illegal give-away of their village-owned parsonage.

Sometime around January 1692, a strange sickness struck several children in the minister’s house, as well as in some of his neighbor’s houses. Rev. Parris’ daughter, Betty, age 9, and niece Abigail Williams, age 11 (her age was raised to 17 in Miller’s play in order to make his fictional plot more plausible), together with Ann Putnam, Jr., the daughter of staunch Parris supporter Thomas Putnam, were affected. Contrary to Miller’s portrayal in The Crucible, the fits they exhibited were not simply playful, but included violent fits, which became more intense over time, spreading to other people, including adults. Rev. John Hale of Beverly, an observer of many of these early happenings, would in later years, describe the symptoms: “These children were bitten and pinched by invisible agents; their arms, necks, and backs turned this way and that way... Sometimes they were taken dumb, their mouths stopped, their throats choked, their limbs wracked and tormented so as might move a heart of stone, to sympathize with them...”
These symptoms were similar to the symptoms of afflicted people in a witchcraft case in Boston in 1689. In the Boston case, Rev. Cotton Mather separated the children from one another, and the symptoms eventually resolved themselves. In Salem, however, the children were kept together, and the symptoms worsened. The villagers held prayer meetings and fasted for the children.

A local physician, most probably William Griggs, was also called to offer his assistance and advice. He could find no physical cause for the symptoms, and suggested that their afflictions were likely the result of bewitchment, and others quickly embraced this explanation.

The town was gripped with fear, and, out of desperation, some concerned adults began pressing the young ones to discover who or what was hurting them. Some sincere but meddling neighbors began attempting to use “white witchcraft” as a means of discovering what was afflicting the victims. A woman named Mary Sibley directed Rev. Parris’ slaves, including a Native American named Tituba (Miller portrays her incorrectly as African American), to concoct a witch cake made of rye and the children’s urine, which was then fed to a dog. At the time, it was believed that dogs were used by witches to carry out their devilish plans. When the minister discovered what Tituba had done, he severely and publicly chastised her, and identified this occurrence as what he believed to be a dangerous new example of allowing the Devil into their community.

It would later be speculated that the girls and perhaps others had been dabbling in unhealthy and sinful games of fortune-telling, which led to the affliction of the girls. However, it is unclear whether Tituba had any hand in fortune-telling with the girls, or in their affliction. Finally, the girls, likely under pressure from unclear sources, named three tormentors. The accused were, notably, safe people to accuse. One was Tituba, the minister’s Native American slave, another a destitute woman of ill repute and possessing a sharp tongue, and the third a sickly woman who had stopped attending church and had an unsavory marital past. Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osburn were the first to be examined. Tituba first vehemently denied performing any witchcraft, but, perhaps afraid of becoming a scapegoat, then confessed to having been approached by the Devil, and having signed her name in his book. She said that she was, indeed, a witch, and that she and four other women, including Sarah Good and Sarah Osburn, had flown through the air on poles. Tituba’s confession silenced the skeptics.

The accusations, examinations, confessions, and further accusations spread rapidly, and, eventually over 150 people were examined and sent to prison. Men and women, rich and poor, were caught up in the investigation. Approximately fifty people confessed to witchcraft. Nineteen who maintained their innocence were tried, found guilty, and hanged, and one old man, Giles Corey, refused to enter a plea, so the court could not proceed with his trial. In order to force him to enter a plea, the court tortured Corey by pressing him between stones. He was pressed to death on Sep. 19, 1692.

Three days after Corey’s death, on September 22, 1692, eight more convicted witches, including Giles’ wife Martha, were hanged. They were the last victims of the witchhunt. By early autumn of 1692, doubts were developing as to how so many respectable people could be guilty. Reverend John Hale said, "It cannot be imagined that in a place of so much
knowledge, so many in so small compass of land should abominably leap into the Devil's lap at once."

Increase Mather, the father of Cotton, published what has been called "America's first tract on evidence," a work entitled Cases of Conscience, which argued that it "were better that ten suspected witches should escape than one innocent person should be condemned." Increase Mather urged the court to exclude "spectral evidence." His writing most likely influenced the decision of Governor Phips to order the court to exclude spectral evidence and touching tests and to require proof of guilt by clear and convincing evidence. With spectral evidence not admitted, twenty-eight of the last thirty-three witchcraft trials ended in acquittals. In May of 1693, Phips released from prison all remaining accused or convicted witches.

By the time the witch hunt ended, nineteen convicted witches were executed. Two dogs were executed as suspected accomplices of witches.

A period of atonement began in the colony following the release of the surviving accused witches. Samuel Sewall, one of the judges, issued a public confession of guilt and an apology. Several jurors came forward to say that they were "sadly deluded and mistaken" in their judgments. Reverend Samuel Parris conceded errors of judgment, but mostly shifted blame to others. Parris was replaced as minister of Salem village by Thomas Green, who devoted his career to putting his torn congregation back together. Governor Phips blamed the entire affair on the Chief Justice of the Court, William Stoughton. Stoughton refused to apologize or explain himself. He criticized Phips for interfering just when he was about to "clear the land" of witches. Stoughton became the next governor of Massachusetts.

**Introduction to The Crucible**

*The Crucible* is a 1953 play by the American playwright Arthur Miller. It is a dramatization of the Salem witch trials that took place in the Province of Massachusetts Bay during 1692 and 1693. Miller wrote the play as an allegory of McCarthyism, when the U.S. government blacklisted accused communists. Miller himself was questioned by the House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities in 1956 and convicted of "contempt of Congress" for refusing to identify others present at meetings he had attended. It was first performed at the Martin Beck Theater on Broadway on January 22, 1953. Miller felt that this production was too stylized and cold and the reviews for it were largely hostile (although *The New York Times* noted "a powerful play [in a] driving performance"). Nonetheless, the production won the 1953 "Best Play" Tony Award. A year later a new production succeeded and the play became a classic. It is a central work in the canon of American drama.

**THE CHARACTERS (Spoiler Alert)**

**By Relationship**

**Parris:** A minister in Salem who is more worried about his reputation than the life of his daughter or the lives of his parishioners

**Betty:** Parris's young daughter; stricken at the beginning of the play; one of the girls who "cry out" during the trial
Abigail: Orphan; niece of Parris; tauntress; mistress of Proctor; leads "crying out" during the trial
Tituba: Parris's slave from Barbados; first accused witch
Putnam: Vindictive, bitter villager who believes he has been wronged and cheated; leading village voice against the witches
Mrs. Putnam: Wife of (Thomas) Putnam; first plants the idea that Betty has been bewitched
Ruth Putnam: Daughter of the Putnams; one of the girls who "cry out" at trials
John Proctor: Good man with human frailties and a hidden secret; often the voice of reason in the play; accused of witchcraft
Elizabeth Putnam: Wife of (John) Proctor; a cold, childless but upright woman who at first cannot forgive her husband's frailties; an accused witch
Mary Warren: Proctor's servant; an easily swayed young girl who plants the evidence of witchcraft on Elizabeth; one of the girls who "cry out" during the trial
Hale: A minister who is a recognized authority on witchcraft; at the play's end tries to save the accused
Danforth: Deputy Governor of Massachusetts who is taken in by the testimony; attempts to get confessions of accused witches
Hathorne: One of the judges for the trials
Rebecca Nurse: Wife of the respected Francis Nurse; midwife; exemplary Christian; accused witch
Francis Nurse: Husband of Rebecca; had land dispute with the Putnams Giles Corey Old, garrulous villager; inadvertently causes his wife to be accused
Sarah Good: Accused witch who cracks under the strain of imprisonment
Cheever: Charged with arresting the witches
Herrick: Also charged with arresting the witches; acts as jailkeeper
Giles Corey: Friend of John Proctor; argues with Putnam over land; accused of witchcraft
Martha Corey: Giles Corey's wife who likes to read; accused witch
Goody Osburn: Midwife at birth of three Putnam babies who were born dead; accused witch