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Salem Witch Trials: What Were The Possible Causes?

# Introduction

The hysteria for witchcraft began to grow in America in the 17th century. Salem witch trials were one of the most famous cases in the in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. The case resulted in the execution of twenty men and women. The case revolved around two women who claimed to be witches and also accused a number of other people in the neighborhood to be the same. The case led the people who were puritans into massive hysteria which also influenced the trial of the case. A number of issues and factors affected the trials at the time. These factors were largely influenced by religious superstitions and spirituality. The trials held that socio-economic, psychological, personal, religion and precocious imagination. This suggested that the public intentionally diverted their stresses from other issues to the trials and although witchcraft amongst the girls could not be proven, the public was persistent to convict the girls.

**Thesis Statement**

The paper tends to explore the facts which led to an escalation of the situation, the condition of the girls and the factors that influenced the trial and their outcomes through primary and secondary sources. It also analyses the witch trials through an interpretive lens.

**Background**

In January 1962, a young girl named Betty and another girl named Abigail Williams who was also the niece of the minister of the Salem village started having fits, which included uncontrolled outbursts of screaming, violent fits and contortions. The doctor could not identify the illness therefore, he suggested it as supernatural powers at play. The supernatural is believed to be the devil's work. Thereafter a lot of other girls also started showing the symptoms of a similar nature. later that month arrest warrants were issued for Betty’s slave and two other homeless women for bewitching the young girls. while the two women denied, Bettys slave girl accepted and also accused other people of working along with her. This caused the people to believe in her story and ed to the outburst of hysteria of witchcraft in the very religious town of Salem. Other women also confessed and named a few more. The court stated giving verdicts and started executing the witches. the people who were going through troubled times hence reflected that the witches caused the drought, the wars and the income inequalities amongst them. Hence it was concluded that the witches were a threat to the society as their motives did not coincide with the notions of religion and shall be eliminated.

**Theoretical perspective**

A number of scholars believed that the roots in the accusations of witches is directly related to the psychological and sociological schools of thought. The theorist suggests that Betty Paris 1962, who was said have displayed strange symptoms, was actually suffering from psychological symptoms rather than supernatural ones, the Puritans needed to identify these signs and symptoms part from their mythical beliefs (Jones). Moreover, the natural calamities such as the famine were associated to be within the powers of the witches, and the Puritans believed that they exercised those powers to cause illness and affliction upon others. Therefore they have deemed pagans who deserved to the death sentence from the court without having any right to appeal. In 1585, re4nuigald Scot stated that these symptoms had sociological along with psychological roots. The witches were used as a scapegoat, against the odds of climate which caused the drought by the public.

# Discussion

A number of social factors were persistent within the Puritan town of Salem, which led to the accusations on the girls. These factors contributed actively to exacerbate the tensions in the town.

It is believed that wars were going on around and the people in Salem were scared that King Phillis might not capture their land, therefore they could have fueled the trial cases and the executions in order to send a message to the armies at distant from the land that they witchcraft could pose a threat to them as well.

The composition of the town of Salem was that of the business-oriented and agrarian villagers, which divide the two into two factions. Hence stating that the villagers were already divided amongst themselves. the disparities led to division on the economic and political fronts and an increased level of hostility between them. the animosity was also coupled with land and farm disputes driving villagers into spells of poverty and difficult for people to survive. Hence in the situation like this, it was noted that people sought comfort in directing their frustrations towards the vulnerable groups such as accusing people of witchcraft. The public vented their frustrations on witches for bringing misfortune and affliction upon them. Those especially family members who tried to defend the accused were also found to accused of witchcraft (Boyer). It was therefore concluded that political and religious discord in Salem must have influenced the trial and increase public outrage over the witches.

the physiological elements could have also been the reason for the condition people might have been suffering from a natural or medical disorder. According to some spectators, the grains of rye which are said to have been a common wielding in Salem could have been contaminated and gained fungus. The rye seeds could which be stored for longer periods of time could have become infected due to dampness in the storage houses. This could have caused an ergot poisoning amongst the people. the consumptions of the contaminated grain are known to cause hallucinations and convulsions in them (Caporael). The fungus can cause a tickling feeling, crawlings sensations, seizure-like muscle contractions. Moreover, another possible reason for the disease could be the encephalitis lethargic which is transmitted by the birds and insects which causes inflammation in the brain. The condition leads to irritability, abnormality in eye movement, headaches, and tremors. Since the doctors could not diagnose and comprehend the disease. The people largely associated it with the supernatural. Moreover, another theory suggests that the conversion disorder can also lead to neurological disorders which cause cognitive inability and show physical symptoms in complaining behaviors of people. Many states the girls let into such situations since they could not survive in the rigid religious society and hence had to seek refuge in insanity. The phenomena occur when there are psychological distress and conflict in an individual it leads to pain in the body which may not be explained by any natural causes.

The girls accused of which craft; Mercy Lewis, Sarah Churchwell, Abigail Hobbs, and Susannah Sheldon may have been afflicted by any of these diseases. They had had a record of participating in the wars (Carlson). Those who take part in wars usually suffer from the post-traumatic stress disorder. It is possible the girls might be suffering from PTSD from the war in Salem at the time. the public could have attributed the behaviors of girls with the symptoms of witchcraft, which can be explicitly explained as a reason for why these girls tested positive for witchcraft in the trial.

# Conclusion

A deliberate conclusion of the case trials shows that there was a possibility of many factors that could have led to the accuse, the accused of witchcraft that could have been a result of many other factors that had sociological, psychological and physiological roots., instead of holding the superstitious and unjustified reasoning for the occurrence. The response of people was massively hysterical which shows that people were backward and carried conventionally puritan thoughts which were difficult to change. Although certain scholars suggest that the widespread diseases did not emerge from one single cause,there were multiple reasons that showed y the epidemic spread and afflicted a number of people. The political rivalries. the political instability and the social inequalities led to the hysterical outspread of the witchcraft in the town. Therefore the sufferings of people, their hardships, conditions, and war strife led people to use the girls as a scapegoat to blame their inabilities to overcome adversities. The people believed and were so motivated to put an end to witchcraft that they did not try to look at the issue from a parallel lens. Regardless of whether the girls practiced witchcraft or not the people in Salem found a way out of their miseries only to find the trial as a distraction for them. The trial cases also had demographic and gender connotations, as they highlighted that women were a prime victim of witchcraft and also the ones who practiced it was women. This highlighted themes of patriarchy which existed in the time and represented that women are evil and weak, hence did not comply with the social norms and values. The ultimate conclusion of the trial represents how ignorance in individuals can make them unable to interpret or comprehend or accept changes while showing wisdom could have saved many lives who were executed baselessly. The accusers saw it as a threat to religious beliefs, which makes it even more complexed and complicated, as it is difficult to fight against religious beliefs.

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