

TAHPDX: Great Decisions in U.S. History

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HISTORY TOPIC: Salem Witch Trials



Attention: This is one of twenty-four topic summaries included in the TAH program and is designed to orient readers to the breadth and depth of the subject. These summaries are by no means exhaustive. Each one is a brief overview of a complex historical topic. Because of the informal nature of a summary, they are not necessarily based on primary sources nor do they employ the full range of scholarly techniques, such as foot- or endnotes. This style of presentation is merely one of the varieties of historical writing that readers will encounter as they explore history.

Abstract: The Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 have long fascinated historians and the general public. Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the leading writers of the nineteenth century and a descendant of an official who persecuted the accused witches, was very interested in the underside of Puritanism. In the twentieth century, Arthur Miller's, *The Crucible*, linked the witchcraft and anti-Communist hysterias. The Salem witchcraft episode has also made regular appearances in movies including actors ranging from Vanessa Redgrave to Bette Midler to Winona Rider. Ann Rinaldi, one of the most prolific and widely read practitioners of historical fiction, tackled the subject in *A Break with Charity*. The Salem Witchcraft trials are replete with themes that interest us: the supernatural, violence and death, and at least a hint of sex. What's not to like? But the trials also intrigue us because they strike us as peculiar. How could a region that would soon produce such luminaries as John and Abigail Adams, Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Louisa Mae Alcott, and the most distinguished college in English America (Harvard), produce such a spasm of violence? What was wrong with these people? What were they thinking? This narrative constitutes a beginning at exploring answers to these questions. We shall try to understand why the Salem Witchcraft trials occurred when they did and why certain people were implicated. This will entail examining a variety of scholarly interpretations that consider both the broad and immediate cultural contexts and several more particular variables, including gender, age, social status and local rivalries, and place of residence.

SUBTOPICS:

1. Context
2. New England
3. The Facts
4. Place and Circumstance
5. Gender
6. Conclusion and Aftermath
7. Sources

1. Context

Understanding how and why a community apparently took leave of their senses to put to death some two dozen people largely on the testimony of a group of young women requires first that we step back from modern assumptions of what is reasonable.

A belief in supernatural explanations for misfortune has been more common than not in the history of the world. Jeffrey Russell and Brooks Alexander remark that sorcery, like magic, “is based on the assumption that the cosmos is a whole and that hidden connections therefore exist among all natural phenomena.” Priests and shamans from the Middle East to West Africa to Central America and beyond sought to anticipate, manipulate, and propitiate this unseen world through sacrifices, libations, amulets, divination, and all manner of ceremonies over thousands of years. We can trace, at least roughly, the evolution of tangible technologies in the history of humanoids, such as the development of projectile points. Less discernible, but certainly as important, were advances in our capacity for self reflection, including the ability to ponder why bad things happen and how to avoid them. The answer, certainly for most people in the history of the world, was not a scientific one. Bad things happened for a reason, usually because a powerful spirit had been offended or perhaps because that spirit had been manipulated by an enemy. Many people across the world continue to believe this today. (This point of view is by no means dead among more educated people. A day spent channel surfing or browsing through the spirituality section of bookstores reveals that many people in the modern western world continue to believe in what rationalists would label as magical explanations for good or bad luck.)

A belief in witchcraft and other forms of magic suffused Early Modern Europe. Not every misfortune could be attributed to witchcraft. But if bad things were happening to good people for no apparent reason, witchcraft might be involved, particularly if one suffered from malevolent neighbors who had uttered threats or curses. About 80 percent of the accused during the Salem Witch Trials were women, often older, husbandless and poor. They almost always lived next to those who accused them of witchcraft and had commonly been turned away upon asking for help. It makes sense, then, that accusations of witchcraft peaked in England between the late sixteenth and mid seventeenth centuries, a period of great socio-economic change and stress when large numbers of peasants were being pushed off their land as powerful landowners took control over more and more land. Witchcraft on the European continent peaked from 1560-1660, a century dominated by Protestant-Catholic tensions and often wars. Outbreaks of superstitious beliefs were likely when these conflicts were accompanied by plagues or famines. In sum, witchcraft flourished at times of great social tensions and accusations usually targeted marginal people (particularly women who did not fit community norms).

2. New England

This belief in witchcraft survived Atlantic crossings to the New World. There were ninety-three witchcraft prosecutions in New England before 1692 and sixteen convictions. Less than one in five who claimed to be innocent were found guilty. Accusations were rare elsewhere in the

colonies. Virginia, where religious life was less intense, tried just nine cases of witchcraft and found just one of the accused guilty, a man who was whipped and banished.

Puritan theology was predisposed to take witchcraft seriously. This was partly a function of Puritanism. As their name suggested, Puritans believed that they were practicing a pure form of Christianity. Many of them moved to New England early in the seventeenth century precisely because they believed the Church of England was too popish (Catholic) and lukewarm. In New England they would establish a godly commonwealth, a pious city on a hill. But Puritans were not perfectionists. As Calvinists, they believed that all humans were bound to sin, that forgiveness came only because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, not because of any human merit. God was in fact well within His rights to condemn everyone to hell. That's what every human deserved. But a merciful God chose to consign or predestine only some people to hell; others would go to heaven. To those who argued that this seemed unfair, Puritans replied that humans were in no position to argue with God. Since God ultimately controlled everything, people who strove to keep his commandments and who prospered in life were likely among the elect who would go to heaven. Sociologists have long pointed out that this belief in predestination ironically gave Puritans and other Calvinists a tremendous incentive to prosper; prosperity brought not just physical comfort, but also psychological peace of mind for it indicated (while not eliciting) God's favor. But when misfortune struck—plagues, failed crops, attacks by Indians—it likely reflected poorly on the spiritual state of the afflicted person or community. Life on Earth was a continue battle between good Christians and the devil, between good and evil. But Satan had only as much power as God decided to give him. Hence attacks from Satan ultimately reflected on the community as a whole, not simply on the witches who had apparently agreed to do Satan's bidding. Satan could afflict people only because God had "lengthened his chain."

Puritans readily perceived the work of God and Satan in events that we now attribute to chance or to science. Like other western people of the seventeenth century, they believed that the world was suffused with "wonders." God and Satan alike had supernatural powers and people paid a great deal of attention to unusual events that might portend good or ill fortune: comets and storms commonly preceded destruction, for example. Puritans of course believed that prayer and fasting and the confessing of and repenting from sins could avert disaster. These rituals were a way of submitting to God and thereby utilizing His power, a way to restore order by driving out sin. But they also turned to pastimes more associated with folk beliefs, including astrology, dreams, and fortune telling.

In sum, the Puritans believed in a God that could easily become angered with them, a devil who was unstinting in his attempts to seduce them, and a world that was full of signs of God's favor or disfavor.

The Puritans, especially, put a great deal of emphasis on social harmony. The first generation had insisted that no one could live alone and that all households had to be in a village. This ensured that everyone could get to church and that everyone could keep an eye on each other. Human nature was weak, after all, and people were less likely to sin if relatives and neighbors were keeping a close eye on them. Most historians emphasize the relative harmony of Puritan communities. Economic survival required social cooperation, certainly inside of households, but

also in the community more generally. God certainly expected people to love and care for each other. After all, the whole point of the Puritans' Holy Experiment was to establish a Holy Commonwealth in which flawed but pious Christians would serve as a shining example to the entire world of a Christian community. Failure to get along therefore had weighty economic, social, and religious implications. Neighbors had high expectations of each other, and they usually supported each other. But when they did not, the conflicts could be intense and enduring because the consequences for the community as a whole were grave (falling out of favor). Accused witches were essentially bad neighbors: quarrelsome, unhelpful, quick to perceive and resent a slight, and—above all—vengeful. These were the precise opposite of the virtues most dear to Puritans.

New England piety seemed more subdued by the last decade of the seventeenth century. The second generation of Puritans had lacked the passion and fire of the founders, a fact that authorities had admitted way back in 1662 by liberalizing church membership through the Half-Way Covenant. Boston, especially, became more cosmopolitan with increased trade. Other denominations appeared, church attendance lagged, merchants in particular became more autonomous, Harvard College became more liberal, and ministers lamented and denounced the decline of piety.

Yet New England remained a highly distinctive place by the 1690s. Churches were much more common than in the South, and the great majority of people took Christianity very seriously and felt keenly the failure of not living up to the standards of the founders. Ministers of this period commonly unleashed jeremiads on their congregations, sermons that castigated church and community members for falling away from the faith of their grandparents. That so many residents took these sermons seriously was evidence that these churches and communities remained, in fact, quite pious.

Puritan beliefs and community pressure certainly predisposed Puritans to engage in witch hunting. John Demos remarks that “witchcraft was a matter of conscious belief no less than inward (and unconscious) propensity.” But believing in the reality of witches was not the same as accusing, trying, and executing people. Relatively few New England Puritans of the seventeenth century believed her or himself to be possessed by a witch and outbreaks of witch hunting were not especially common. However, several historical circumstances intersected in 1691-1692 to convince the residents of Salem Village that they were in the crosshairs of Satan's devious designs.

3. The Facts

Late in 1691 several young women or girls of Salem Village were dabbling in magic—to find out what kind of man they might marry, for example. One of them constructed a sort of crystal ball by suspending egg whites in water and they saw in this mixture a coffin. They were troubled by disturbing visions. Some of the girls started having “fits,” and the malady spread to others in the community. A local doctor could find no medical cause for this condition and suggested that the girls were under an “evil hand,” that they were possessed or bewitched. By late February, 1692, the girls had relented under pressure to name their tormenters and identified

three women who well fit the usual profile of accused witches: Sarah Good (who was poor and contentious), Sarah Osborne (long widowed and involved in a property dispute), and Tituba, an Indian slave from the Caribbean Basin.

Tituba ended up playing a crucial role in the trials, though that role has been often misunderstood. Tituba was evidently an Arawak Indian (not, as often thought, of African descent) born in the mid-1660s, probably on the northeast coast of Latin America (Guyana or Venezuela). She was enslaved and sent to Barbados, where she and her future husband, Indian John, were purchased by Samuel Parris, a merchant who took her to Boston by the end of 1680. Parris switched to the ministry in 1686 and moved to Salem in 1688 with his wife, three children, and three slaves (Tituba, her husband and a young African American). One of Parris's children and a niece were among the early experimenters in magic and many interpretations of the witchcraft trials have depicted Tituba as a conjurer who was teaching the white girls and young women the magic of her native land. But there is no direct evidence of this and Tituba's biographer doubts that she was involved at all. Unlike the other two accused of witchcraft, Tituba obligingly confessed to witchcraft and provided many lurid details. Historians have often been puzzled as to why Tituba confessed so readily and supplied so many details. She later recanted and said that she confessed because her master, Reverent Parris, had beaten her. This is certainly plausible, as Tituba no doubt discerned that resisting her master would get her in even more trouble. But Tituba, unlike the Puritan ministers, drew a distinction between "white" and "black" magic. This would explain why she confessed to some aspects of sorcery but not others. In any event, Parris had many enemies in the community and was no doubt embarrassed that his child and niece were so deeply implicated in peculiar and dangerous practices. The Puritans already associated Indians with demonic practices and putting the blame on an Indian slave was a good way to shift attention away from his kin. Whatever might have motivated Tituba's confession, there is no doubt that it fueled fires of suspicion which otherwise might have burned out, as she testified that there were many witches loose in Salem. (As Tituba had confessed, she was not executed. Parris refused to pay the jail fees necessary to free her, and an unknown person paid her fees and took her away in 1693. She then disappears from the historical record, though she likely had a child who remained in the Parris household.)

The number of apparently afflicted people spread, first to other young women, until some forty-eight were claiming to be tormented by witches. The panic spread to other villages in western Massachusetts, particularly neighboring Andover. Nearly 200 hundred people, three quarters of them women, were eventually accused of witchcraft. Twenty-seven were tried and convicted before Sir William Phips (Royal Governor of the Colonies) halted the proceedings late in 1692. By that time twenty had been executed and several had died in prison.

The trials often featured great spectacles. The young, afflicted women had fits and screamed that the accused were pinching or biting them. They described visions of satanic figures in the courtroom. This was unusual, even for the times. Most accusations of witchcraft before Salem had claimed that the accused had acted more indirectly, by destroying property, for example, not by actually inhabiting the bodies of the afflicted.

The magistrates took at least some pains to try to discern whether or not the accused were guilty. They tried hard to extract confessions from purported witches, in part because witchcraft was so

hard to definitively prove, a fact that helps to explain why previous accusations of witchcraft seldom ended with convictions and executions. Signs of witchcraft included: the “devil’s teat” (unusual folds of flesh near women’s sexual organs that the devil and his impish minions suckled at); the “devil’s mark” (odd markings on the skin); the inability to recite scripture without stumbling; and evidence that the accused had a vendetta against or had cursed the possessed. Some of the accused were convicted on these grounds. But other convictions relied heavily on the “spectral evidence” of the young women. Authorities ordinarily approached such evidence skeptically. But the young women’s fits and visions were very convincing. If a suspect wrung her hands, they might cry out that she was pinching them. If she bit her lip, she was biting them. When the magistrates ordered the accused to touch the afflicted, their fits immediately ceased—which is exactly what the touch of a witch was supposed to do in such circumstances.

There is no simple answer as to why the accusations, trials, and executions tailed off later in 1692. Certainly the fact that accusations were spreading to very respectable people, including the new governor’s wife, played a role. “The afflicted spare no person of what quality so ever,” complained an attorney representing one of the accused. These sort of sentiments spread after some highly regarded people were put to death. One man recited the Lord’s Prayer perfectly just before being executed, a feat that witches were not supposed to be able to do. Another accused witch made the point that the devil might have taken her shape without her knowledge, an assertion that made spectral evidence still more problematic. The elderly and influential Mr. Increase Mather, though not explicitly condemning the trials, eventually preached that it was better to set ten witches free than to kill a single innocent person. Of course the fact that so many of the most voluble accusers were young women, precisely the sort of people thought to be most prone to acting hysterically, added to people’s doubts.

The Salem witchcraft trials were peculiar in several respects. Witchcraft prosecutions had occurred in New England from 1647 to 1663, and by the latter date such undertakings had become rare and increasingly out of favor in New England. The Salem episode, moreover, was unusually virulent and sustained. Most outbreaks had lasted only for a few weeks or months. The Salem outbreak elicited many more accusations and prompted more executions than any other in North America. Many of the accused, moreover, were respected church members, some from prominent families, and many of them did not directly know those who accused them.

Coming to terms with the Salem witch trials, then, requires not simply an understanding of why Puritans believed in witchcraft and occasionally tried and executed people for practicing it. It also requires explaining the unusual scope, duration, and nature of the episode. It requires a closer look at Salem Village in the early 1690s.

4. Place and Circumstance

Anthropologists of witchcraft point out that accusations commonly occurred when tight-knit communities experienced a sense of internal division or external pressures. Both sets of circumstances were acute in Salem Village by the early 1690s.

Reverend Parris, whose household was at the epicenter of the witchcraft storm, believed that the devil had been loosed in the community. The highly contentious minister divided community opinion and faced substantial opposition even within his own church. He was angered that the congregation had recently docked his salary and refused to provide him with firewood. Parris took these slights very personally and interpreted them through a religious lens which very much colored his response to the fits that his daughter, niece, and other young women suffered.

Other residents of Salem Village were also predisposed to discern the devil's work. Eastern Massachusetts had recently suffered from outbreaks of epidemic disease, precisely the sort of visitations associated with divine retribution, the devil's work, or both. Political instability was also rife, as Massachusetts had recently lost its coveted charter and hence its capacity to govern itself. Indeed, the witchcraft trials would be suspended for several months as the colony awaited the arrival of a new governor and charter.

The residents of Salem Village had particular reason to feel vulnerable. It had been much affected by Indian wars: King Philip's War from 1675-78 and a new conflict that had broken out in 1688. These wars occurred on New England's northern frontier. But they harmed the entire region's economy by harming the fishing and timber industries, and they of course raised the question of why God allowed Indians who were Catholic or allied with Catholic France to fare so well in the wars. Salem Village contributed militia members to the battles and housed many of the wars' refugees. Those survivors in fact figured prominently in the witchcraft trials as both accusers and accused. Two people executed for witchcraft had lived in Maine, and some of the accused and the accusers had known each other there. Mary Beth Norton, the principal proponent of the role of Indian wars in the witchcraft episode, points out that survivors of these bloody Indian wars were likely suffering from what today would be known as "post-traumatic stress syndrome," a condition that helps to explain why they would be prone to fits of apparent "spirit possession."

Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum identify another historical development, namely the uneven economic development in and around Salem Village. Salem Village was in fact a sort of appendage to Salem Town, and the differences and divisiveness within the village and between the village and its more cosmopolitan neighbor were growing. Salem Town and the part of Salem Village that abutted the town were becoming much more prosperous than the rest of Salem Village. The town had the port of Salem that was growing in activity. East Salem Village participated in this boom due to its proximity. It had artisans, saw and grist mills, and taverns. Meanwhile the agricultural economy that the rest of Salem Village depended on was in decline. The average holding was halved between 1660 and 1690 and the roads linking most parts of the village to Salem Town remained poor. Salem Town and East Salem Village were enjoying the fruits of a growing mercantile economy. The rest of Salem Village was suffering the decline of a subsistence economy that Puritans had long associated with godliness. The religious breach that opened up around Reverend Parris in fact mirrored this geographic/economic split. The more prosperous residents of East Salem Village were much more likely to oppose him than were those who lived in the less prosperous, more agricultural part of the village. This economic disparity was accompanied by political ones. Salem Village lacked legal autonomy. In 1690 their request for a status independent of Salem Town had been voted down, and its residents were criticized for manifesting an un-Christian "restless frame of spirit."

The accusations expressed in the trial tended to follow this geographic/economic/political split. As time passed, the possessed people of Parris's faction were more likely to accuse their more prosperous counterparts to the east, people that they sometimes had no first-hand acquaintance with and could not even recognize in court.

Boyer and Nissenbaum are not arguing that the Parris faction crudely used witchcraft to punish their enemies. Rather, the possessed logically associated Satan and his servants with the malevolent external agents that were, they believed, tormenting their community. The embittered Parris and his allies, already convinced that Satan had been loosed upon Salem Village, was of course highly susceptible to the young women's charges against the very parties that opposed him. The presence of deeply held grudges and suspicions helps to explain why the episode did not follow most witchcraft outbreaks in subsiding after a few accusations and convictions. The impulses that sustained the outbreak were complex, deeply held and not easily sated.

5. Gender

Boyer and Nissenbaum do not pay much attention to gender. One could argue that women almost always constituted the majority of accused witches, at Salem and elsewhere, so this variable might be obvious and deserves little attention. But one cannot understand witchcraft in general or the outbreak at Salem in particular without examining women's particular roles in the community.

Witchcraft was certainly bound up with misogyny and women's social and cultural roles in the early modern western world. Some historians have wildly exaggerated the number of women put to death as witches. Not every independent-minded woman ended up being hanged or burned at the stake. But it was no coincidence that the great majority of people accused of witchcraft in Europe, England, and North America were women, and that these women tended to fall far short of the submissive ideal that Puritan society laid out for them.

Puritans were unabashed patriarchs. Like other English people of that time, they conceived of human society as a triangle, or Chain of Being, with a few rulers near the top and the mass of people near the bottom. Families were "little commonwealths," with husbands at the head and wives and children arrayed under them. Women had souls, but men were their natural and rightful rulers. Headship brought responsibility, to be sure. Husbands were not to think of themselves first, were to love and cherish their wives and children who were subject to their authority, and were to treat them as Christ treated the church. In fact the Puritans created both the western world's first laws against wife beating and relatively liberal divorce laws. But wife beating was perfectly acceptable—even salutary—if done in "moderation" to a wife who had been disobedient, and divorce and even separations were still rare. The ideal husband was powerful but kind and judicious, the ideal wife submissive and industrious. Both should be highly pious, though men were thought to have more spiritual and moral strength than women. By the late seventeenth century, however, this typology was fraying around the edges, as women were greatly outnumbering men in many Puritan congregations. Yet it still made perfect sense to Puritans that women were more likely to sin, to be susceptible to the devil's snares, than men.

Carol Karlsen points out that Puritans were much more likely to accuse certain women of witchcraft than others. Women who failed to meet the ideal of a submissive, agreeable wife were most vulnerable. Anne Hutchinson, the antinomian preacher early expelled from Massachusetts Bay, was reputed to be a witch. Women who were contentious and quarrelsome were much more likely to be accused of witchcraft than those who were meek, particularly if they went around muttering under their breaths when people would not give them what they wanted. Gossip was in fact a way in which women could exercise power. Devoid of official positions in government or church, their legal status usually subsumed by a husband or father, women's tongues had the power to undercut the reputations of even powerful men in tightly knit communities. But if gossip constituted a rare opportunity for women to wield power, it could also provide grounds for accusing women with "unbridled tongues" of witchcraft.

Widowed women and women without any or many male heirs were also more likely to be accused of witchcraft. Such women often had property, something that most women of the time did not. Property taken from accused witches might well end up in the hands of men. This does not mean that witchcraft accusations were part of a conscious strategy to dispossess such women. Rather, women who owned property and who were not directly under the control of a father, husband, or other man did not fit the ideal role of womanhood that the Puritans had laid out. Not all independent or property-holding women were accused of witchcraft, of course. But they were much more likely to be accused than women who owned no property and were clearly subjected to a husband's authority.

The Salem witchcraft episode was unusual in that nearly all of the accusers were women, and the outbreak began among a group of young women. Anthropologists point out that possession commonly serves as a largely or wholly unconscious form of psychic release. Certainly young Puritan women were under very heavy expectations to comport themselves with dignity and submissiveness. Rolling about on the floor, loudly accusing others of tormenting them, having the power of life and death over others, and being the center of the community's attention and sympathies was the exact opposite of what their lives were normally like. Being possessed by spirits was about the only way for women of that time and place to express anger and alienation and to be heard. Women were more apt than men to see themselves as likely targets of Satan. Ministers told them that everyone was totally depraved, of course, but women more so than men. This helps to explain why women were both more apt to perceive themselves as being possessed by Satan and more likely to confess to having collaborated with him. Of course only a small minority of young Puritan women claimed to be possessed or confessed to witchcraft. But these "deviant" or unusual experiences can be linked to more mainstream beliefs.

6. Conclusion and Aftermath

As with any unusual and intense event, historians of the Salem witchcraft trials commonly distinguish between pre-existing conditions and precipitating events. The pre-existing conditions included Puritans beliefs in witchcraft and their association of women—particularly women—with witchcraft. The outbreak at Salem would not have occurred without those beliefs.

Yet those beliefs had existed across New England for several decades. Why did the outbreak occur at this particular time and place, and with such sustained intensity? Explanations include the presence of acute tensions (quarrels within the community rooted in both religious and socio-economic differences that expressed themselves geographically) and acute hardships (many of the accusers and accused had survived the trauma of Indian wars). To this list must be added factors that could be counted as historical accidents, such as the presence of the Indian Tituba, whose early, detailed confession exacerbated fears that many more witches lurked in the community, and the personality of Reverend Pariss, a quarrelsome man ready to believe the worst of his many real and imagined enemies. But these contingencies were the product of historical processes as well as luck. The Puritans of that time and place readily believed in the devilish nature of Indians, and Pariss's personality and outlook were by no means rare.

The Salem witchcraft episode can be understood as the product of a sort of perfect storm, the convergence of a highly unusual set of short-term circumstances that intersected with more durable beliefs to create the most intense event of its kind in the English colonies. The Salem witchcraft episode retained its distinctiveness even after it closed. Unlike earlier outbreaks, it was almost immediately followed by a string of recantations and other expressions of regret by judges, jury members, and accusers. This string of confessions of course served to discredit the entire enterprise. Clearly innocent blood had been shed. Within two decades, the colony's legislature voted to compensate the survivors and descendants of those who had been jailed or executed.

The largest witchcraft episode in the colonies was also the last significant one. Accusations of witchcraft continued to appear. But the authorities—secular and religious—refused to take them very seriously. This was partly in reaction to the excesses of the Salem trials and partly a function of a longer trend: the spread of scientific, rational ideas among educated Puritans and pious people's growing optimism about the capacity to seize salvation, to be free from the devil's snares. The eighteenth century would increasingly belong to them, even as the occult would continue to flourish in many ways among the less educated majority.

The broader process of creating scapegoats, of an anxious or besieged community blaming a particular and marginal set of people for broadly shared problems, outlived Salem. Rural Americans of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would commonly blame "Jewish bankers" for economic downturns. Catholics came in for a great deal of criticism until at least the early twentieth century, as did immigrants more generally. After World War II, Communists were said to be at the heart of America's decay; Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* eloquently linked the Salem witchcraft trials with the anti-Communist fervor of McCarthyism. More locally, a sociological study of Cottage Grove, Oregon around 1990 describes how anxieties over economic and social changes such as divorce, poor schools, a more intrusive government, and the fact that "men didn't know how to be men anymore" coalesced around a political movement to marginalize homosexuality.

We need to resist the temptation to label every conservative social movement as a "witch hunt." The Salem witch trials were, as we have seen, the product of specific, even unique, historical circumstances and religious beliefs. Many people still believe in or even practice witchcraft. But, luckily, few of them fear being executed for it.

The sort of complex and disturbing religious, cultural, psychological, social, economic, political and geographic forces that shaped Salem Village in 1692 continue to affect us, often in ways that we are unaware of. The varied interpretations of the Salem witch trials suggest that well-intentioned people can be guilty of very harmful acts, particularly when trying to explain or come to terms with suffering that seems undeserved and inexplicable. Our reactions to such misfortunes are commonly motivated by impulses that are understood dimly or not at all, and those impulses commonly lead us, in the name of God, country, or community, to commit acts that seem right and fit at the time, and cruel and illogical only in retrospect.

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