

-I used the 1981 ed. of the play from PENGUIN PLAYS (just so you know for the quotes)

The people of Salem can hardly be condemned for their actions during the witch hunts of 1692, as described in the play *The Crucible*, for they were merely products of their time. This is shown through an examination of the theocratic society in which they lived, the patriarchal snobbery they exhibited toward each other, their lack of medical technology and in depth knowledge of disease and of an analysis of the fear they displayed of the unknown. This is important as it shows that the Salemites were not entirely evil people, for they were only reacting to a situation in the only suitable manner they knew. Studying the actions of the Salemites during this period can ensure that history does not repeat itself, avoiding another Salem tragedy from occurring.

At the time of the witch hunts, the Salemite's society was an organized theocracy in which their Puritan church ruled. It was instilled to ensure moral order and justice within Salem and "to prevent any disunity that might open it to destruction by material or ideological enemies" (Miller 7). While espousing purity and godliness, the Puritans of Salem were a political group with leanings toward power and weakness. They were unable to keep these two characteristics in check at the time of the witch hunt. This resulted in the witch hunts becoming "a perverse manifestation of the panic which set in among all classes when the balance began to turn toward greater individual freedom" (Miller 7). Their theocracy allowed for no expression of individuality, lest the individual, in short, ask for public condemnation. The theocracy of the Salem society at the time was an enormous factor to the conditions surrounding the witch hunts.

The Salemites exhibited patriarchal snobbery toward each others and those who were different. "Their church found it necessary to deny any other sect its freedom, lest their New Jerusalem be defiled and corrupted by wrong ways and deceitful ideas." (Miller 5). As Puritans, felt they were superior to any other sect, including the Indians. They had attempted to convert the Indians, but had failed miserably. Then, the girls were seen dancing in the forest, a place regarded as "the last place on earth not paying homage to God" (Miller 5) as that was where the non-Christian Indians lived. The Salemites would have thought the dancing girls to be evil not only because of the location they were caught in, but also because they were not acting in the way any proper, upstanding Salemite and Puritan would act. Therefore, they must be possessed by the Devil. No other religious groups were present at the time to oppose them, or to teach them religious and social tolerance as seen in society today.

The medical technology and knowledge of disease possessed by the Salemites was scarce in comparison to that which is known today. If an illness could not be cured, or at least identified, it was considered supernatural and the workings of Satan. At the beginning of Act I, Susanna Walcott says, "[Doctor Griggs] bid me come and tell you, reverend sir, that he cannot discover no medicine for it in his books . . . he have been searchin' his books since he left you, sir. But he bid me tell you, that you might look to unnatural things for the cause of it," (*The Crucible*, Act I 9) concerning the doctor's lack of a cure for Betty's illness. Another example was Mrs. Putnam. Seven of her babies had died, and she could not find concrete reason for their deaths. Her daughter, Ruth, had now taken ill and no natural explanation was able to explain for it. She automatically concluded that it was a supernatural power, the Devil, at work. Witchcraft became the concrete answer for the Salemites who had experienced illnesses and deaths which were unaccountable. Had they possessed more knowledge of disease and medicine, as today's society does, some Salemites may not have been as susceptible to the witch hunt hysteria which took place.

A fear of the unknown, anything that was different, and superstition plagued the Salemites. The girls' act of dancing in the forest was out of the ordinary, so the

Salemmites assumed something was wrong with them and that there were supernatural powers at work within them. Never before seen illnesses and unexplainable deaths scared the Salemmites, and to ease their fears, they blamed something specific: the Devil. The slightest possibility of evil infiltrating their Puritan society, in the form of witches, terrified the Salemmites. They called for Reverend Hale of Beverly at the slightest inkling of belief that there was a possibility of witchcraft in the town. They did not tolerate anything that was different from them, such as witches or the Indians, because the Salemmites considered them to be against God and, therefore, against all they stood for as Puritans. The Salemmites were very superstitious and very similar people. They shared the same religious beliefs and lived in a small town where everyone knew everyone else. Their superstitions were never counteracted with arguments from other religious groups, by people from different backgrounds, or by anyone with a different perspective on life or way of thinking. Today's society is far more diverse than that of the Salemite community in 1692, and we have more explanations for the fears we face in our society. Had the Salemmites been exposed to a wider variety of opinions and explanations for the fears they faced in their time, the witch hunts may not have taken place.

There is a modern example of the hysteria and injustice that took place in Salem. It involves the wave of emotional accusations of child abuse against school teachers and caregivers. Regardless of guilt or innocence, once a person has been accused of abuse, they are automatically assumed to be guilty, and the accuser is never second guessed. As well, even if they are proven innocent, their reputation is permanently tarnished. This is the same as what happened in Salem: the accused were never able to clear their names, and the accusers became untouchable, becoming the "holy one". By studying the tragedy that occurred in Salem, history can avoid being repeated, and the same personal injustices in today's society can be averted and ceased. Had the Salemmites lived in a less theocratic society that allowed for increased personal freedom, had they been exposed to a more culturally and religiously diverse society and had they been more knowledgeable in the medical field, the Salemmites would not have been as susceptible to the frenzy and madness that took place in their community concerning witchcraft. For these aforementioned reasons, the Salemmites cannot be condemned for their actions involving the witch hunts of 1692, as they were merely products of their time.

