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### The Salem Witch Trials and Mass Hysteria

When one hears the phrase, “mass hysteria,” they might have absolutely no idea what to expect from the term, but it is actually a lot more common than you might expect. Have you ever been with a friend, and for some reason, as soon as you look at each other you start laughing, and you cannot stop? To the point where your laughter becomes hysterical? Well, this is a small case of what is called, “mass hysteria.” This exact idea of wild laughter is actually involved in a very popular case that occurred in Tanganyika in the 1960s (also called the laughter epidemic). You may be wondering, What is considered Mass Hysteria? Well, one might think of it as an ancient concept, a group of people so obsessed with a certain idea that they manifest it into their own lives. An illness, a worry, any kind of fear that affects the group so deeply that they almost create its existence. Cases of mass hysteria in history are baffling, such as the Dance Plagues of the early 14th century, the above-mentioned Tanganyika Laughter Epidemic, and - the most popular and startling of all - The Salem Witch Trials.

The Salem Witch Trials transpired in colonial Massachusetts during the years 1692 and 1693. During this time, more than 200 people living peacefully in modern day America were accused of practicing the Devil’s magic - witchcraft. Of these 200 people, 25 of them were

killed. What started as a few cases of bad behavior, soon developed into dozens of accusations, starvation, torture, and eventually, murder. There is no true explanation for a case of mass hysteria, but there are some factors that work together to make the situation. Some of these factors in the case of the Salem Witch Trials included their religion and the way they practiced it, their gender roles, and their seeming lack of humanity and mercy. In today's world, we may think that we are far away from the remarkable and horrible acts of the early world, but we are still human, and therefore we still have things we cannot control.

In the early Americas, religion was a huge aspect of life. The colonizers originally moved away from their homeland of England to practice whatever religion they pleased, and so religious freedom truly became a fundamental aspect of their lives. America became the home to many people with different spiritual beliefs, and colonies everywhere began establishing churches for their people.

In early Salem, the practiced religion was Calvinism, a theological system based off of puritanism which was created by John Calvin and emphasized the ideas of, "the sovereignty of God, the depravity of humankind, and the doctrine of predestination" [EJ1] (The belief that God already knows whether you will go to heaven or hell). In Salem, religion was the most important aspect of their lives; those who lived there were expected to keep an extremely strict moral code and rigorous church schedule. Those who did not conform and follow the rules made by the church were punished accordingly. It was the belief of those in Salem that all humans are sinners and unworthy of the respect of God.

Another aspect of Calvinism is the belief that Satan is just as real as God, and that his pupils are those who are weakest at holding the puritan beliefs; for example, an adulterous man,

or a woman who refuses to attend church (one of the first accused witches, Sara Osburne, was actually guilty of the latter). The people of Salem desperately feared the devil and his working, which is the main reason so many were accused so quickly: to stomp out the smear of evil the people of Salem believed was happening in their town.

One thing that is often questioned and debated by historians and the average citizen alike, is the question, why was the Calvinist religion an excuse for murder? There is no true answer that we can decide upon for this, unfortunately, but the question remains. How can a town at the peak of their modern society fall back upon their most basic animal instincts, those feral feelings that protect us all when we are in a situation that puts us in our most vulnerable states? The decision to not only take a life, but openly mock the loss of it and to display their deaths for all to see is an extremely primal way of protecting the masses by fear. However, as horrible as we may see the cases of the Salem Witch Trials, at the time they were happening, the people thought of it as a great justice, something that absolutely had to be done. The very basic belief of the people was that God was to be feared and they needed to work to redeem themselves from what they believe they are, human and therefore without worth. In the eyes of the people of Salem, those that used “witchcraft” were spawn of the devil, come to tempt them back into the sin that birthed them. The murder, the lies, the loss of their humanity, that was all what they thought would protect them. Of course, throughout the history of the world there are dozens of cases of religious beliefs being the motivation for crimes and horrors. Salem is no different. While religion is hard to consider as an excuse for anything, it can truly define a person/people’s lifestyle, and in the case of those in Salem, it was the driving factor of their entire lives. However, the Calvinist’s religion contrasted directly not only with the very idea of being humane, but also with their own laws and court situations.

One instance where the Calvinist religion and the laws in the court of Salem sorely collide is in the case of John Proctor, one of the first males accused of witchcraft. It is important to note the accusation was false, but there still needed to be a trial as per the laws of Salem. In the case of witches, it was a court law that if the accused admitted to their charge, they would not be put to death. However, if the accused did not admit to their guilt, then they could be executed in any way the people saw fit. John Proctor was a high-ranking member of the Calvinist church in Salem, and he filled his role with passion. He could very well have lied and admitted his guilt, but it was a sin to lie in his religion, so he steadfastly refused to plead guilty and admit that he was a wizard. Because of his firm belief in the church in Salem, John Proctor was hanged.

There were many strange laws that were enforced to battle witchcraft, even before the Salem Witch Trials. In the year of 1604, an English law called The Witchcraft Law of 1604, was implemented. This law was an “act against conjuration, witchcraft and dealing with evil and wicked spirits” (Smith, 2017). This law made anything that could be considered witchcraft a felony, and any individuals accused of such would receive a year in prison. However, if they were convicted a second time, they would be put to death. In 1642, the general court drafted the Body of Liberties, a collection of criminal offences. There was a single, short law on witchcraft included, which cited biblical verses to prove its authority, “If any man or woman be a witch, that is, hath or consulteth with a familiar spirit, they shall be put to death (Exod. 22. 18; Deut. 13. 6, 10; Deut. 17. 2, 6).” This simple sentence was all that condemned those accused of witchcraft, and it cost the lives of as many as 100,000 people throughout the 1600s and even into the next century.

By the time the Salem Witch Trials actually happened, there were already laws written into place that condemned witchcraft, and while there were just over 200 deaths in Salem, an

estimated 50,000 people (Andrews, 2018) were killed in early Europe and America, all because of the fear those people had of the devil corrupting them. What is the main meaning this has? The case of the Salem Witch Trials is not the only case of mass hysteria involving witchcraft and early America/Europe, but rather the most popular instance.

The Salem witch trials is the most popular case of a witchcraft crazed town not only because of the sudden terror that seemingly developed overnight, but the gruesome ways in which those accused of witchcraft were punished and killed. There were many bizarre tests that were used to decide if one was a witch, some more popularly known than others. Some examples are: the swimming test (where the witch was thrown into a body of water to find out if they would sink or float; sinking meaning they were innocent, and floating meaning they were guilty); the prayer test (where the accused was forced to read a scripture aloud to see if they were able (however, this wasn't very reliable, especially in the case of George Burroughs, who flawlessly recited a prayer from the gallows, but was still executed afterwards); and the touch test (where a possessed person who fell into fits would place a hand on the accused, and if their fits stopped, this proved they were under a spell) (Andrews, 2014). When the "witch" finally made it to court, there was an entire system the judge and jury followed to ensure their capture. Yes, ensure; one thing that those in Salem desperately wanted but never received were fair, unbiased trials. The courtroom was a battlefield of witch versus the entire town. The only way to save yourself was to confess and reveal your coven, and thus those who were first accused acted almost as a domino effect towards the others, an entire chain link of person after person accusing their neighbors and friends of witchcraft to save their own behinds.

One thing that seriously affected the Salem witch trials? The blatant sexism of that period. In our current society, it is easy to look back in time and acknowledge that there are very

few points in history in which men and women had the same rights, and early America is absolutely not an exception. Women especially were vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. Of those executed in the Salem Witch Trials, 78% of them were female (Daley, 2019). Even when men were accused, it was typically because they had some sort of association with a woman who was found guilty. In fact, the entire event was mostly female-centric, with not only most of the victims being female, but also almost all the accusers and witnesses (Colburn, 2015). It was a puritan belief that women were more likely to be tempted by the devil, as evidenced by Eve and her sinful apple. Because less than 30% of women in this age were literate, and most of them lacked the powers of reason and moral discipline, it was quite difficult for them to defend themselves in court rooms, since they had no lawyers to build their cases and they were therefore much less likely to escape an accusation with their life.

The issue with the Salem Witch Trials being mostly a female issue was it thoroughly confirmed in the minds of the puritans that women were to blame for any kind of hysteria or mental illness of any kind. As history continued to move past the trials, the idea that hysteria was an effect of the uterus remained, and it actually followed history into the late 1880s, roughly 200 years after Salem had moved on from the trials. Really, even before the 1600s and the witchcraft craze, the definition of hysteria was already written, and it said, “from the Greek notion that hysteria was peculiar to women and caused by disturbances of the uterus.” It seems that the idea of Hysteria womb had come not from the blatant sexism in the 1600s, but from the ancient Greeks. At that time, there were several theories on the uterus and its ill effects on the body, one being the ‘roaming uteri’ theory, in which it was believed that, “a uterus could migrate around the female body, placing pressure on other organs and causing any number of ill effects.” (McVean, 2017). The very basic belief was regarding “feminine fluids” and that they were the

cause of anxiety, insomnia, depression, irritability, fainting and other symptoms women experienced. As time moved forward, this theory stuck and for many years caused women extreme grief, and ultimately lead to the discrimination towards them that resulted in cases like the Salem Witch Trials. Even as late as the 1980s, the term 'hysteria' followed women. It was a sort of explanation for all that men did not understand or found unmanageable about women. The only treatments really discussed? regular (marital) sex, marriage or pregnancy and childbirth, all 'proper' activities for a 'proper' woman. It is absolutely shocking to look back on this now, especially as a woman, and to wonder how many others passed into this "medical" term that is truly just more horrific than anything. As we realize today, Hysteria is much more than just having a uterus.

The fact is, the thing that makes the Salem Witch Trials so fascinating, besides the glimpse into a very different past, is the very mystery of why the entire thing happened. Mass hysteria in itself is so very unknown that it immediately draws in the attention. The motivation behind events of mass hysteria (The Dance plague, Tanganyika Laughter Epidemic, etc.) is usually only made up of theories and assumptions. What is true mass hysteria? What is the cause behind it? The usual explanation is that it is a "psychogenic illness," or, "a condition that begins in the mind, rather than in the body." However, the physical symptoms of a psychogenic illness are very much real and delivered to your body by your overactive brain. At any point in your life, have you ever been so extremely worried or stressed about being sick that you actually make yourself sick thinking about it? This is exactly what mass hysteria is, on a much smaller scale. A fear that paralyzes an entire community will eventually become a part of it, that much is true. In early Salem, the crippling fear the people held in their hearts of their sins and the demons that supposedly walked the Earth to tempt them were so severe that they saw them in every shadow

and hunted out flaws in their fellow people to make them easier to destroy. The accused witches often had committed some inexcusable wrong that made them vulnerable to their fellow scared townspeople. To those who lived in Salem, ones' very existence was sin, and the easiest escape from their mistakes was to blame it all on one person, a sacrifice of sorts. The loss of one for the gain of all... But, as we know, it unfortunately did not stop at just one.

One of the most accurate representations of the Salem Witch Trials we see today is *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, a play that truly gets down and dirty with the law and corruption behind the witches and their convictions. The fact is Arthur Miller was living through a point in time which had a lot in common with the setting of his play. In the 1950s with the war between capitalism and communism raging between America and Russia, dehumanizing the soviets by saying they could have no God, the same bone-deep fear consumed the American people, and Miller was living this life first hand. He said, "Fear doesn't travel well; just as it can warp judgment, its absence can diminish memory's truth. What terrifies one generation is likely to bring only a puzzled smile to the next." (Miller, 1996) As Miller says, fear is not something that can be passed down. We today may not understand what happened in the 1950s, or understand the fear that motivated the people at all. The only thing that we may understand about it is the feeling of being absolutely terrified. There may not be the same fear involving Russia in everyday conversation anymore, but there is still fear, and so we can still in a way understand the mindsets of the people at that time.

*The Crucible* touches on the very bases of human nature and the horrors that we don't like to talk about. Blame, minority vs minority, and the basic survival instinct that can cause humans to so easily turn on each other. The situation in Salem, though it may seem like an outdated, horrific piece of history is a lot more modern than we like to think it is. The fear the



townspeople felt of the devil and the weight of their sins whittled them down to the very basis of human nature, and as much as we hate to say it, we are the very same humans today as we were then, as different as our morals and motivations may be.

Just how much mass hysteria is there today that we have never defined as such? In the United States, Covid-19 is a constant terror, so how have we seen instances of hysterical outbursts? From stockpiling toilet paper to the point of lackage, Asian hate, to storming the United States Capital, there have been many instances of mass panics that shook our nation. Though masks, hand sanitizer, and social distancing might seem like our everyday now, who's to say that this isn't actually an instance of mass hysteria that we aren't labeling as such? Through the years, we have had instances of mass panic before, and not due to a pandemic that seemingly haunts our daily lives. In the 1950s, the age of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, the cold war and communism kept U.S citizens up at night, and in the early 2000s, the event of 9/11 led to a huge wave of islamophobia that still haunts our nation today. So what really is the difference between the fear that led to murder in one town, and the panic that causes years upon years of trauma in a country? The ripples of the terrors that happened 50 years ago still affect us on a daily basis. What changes when we call an event from 400 years ago versus a situation we are living in today mass hysteria? Why is it that you can't seem to find examples of mass hysteria from anything past the early 1900s? If cases of mass panic seem to date as far back as humans do, there has to be some part of us that is truly motivated by fear. So is mass hysteria a part of human nature? There are any points in our everyday lives that we base decisions on fears of what might happen, so fear must in some way drive us. Fight or flight response, stage fright, our irrational fears; these are things that happen every single day, these are fears that move us like pawns. How do these simple fears become huge cases of panic? Why is it that this cycle seems to continue from

generation to generation, each one finding some kind of event to send them into a frenzy of fear-induced panic?

Although we may not look around us and label things as mass hysteria, it is definitely out there, and it truly does affect millions of people. This seems to be a part of our human nature, the need to destroy the things that we fear to protect ourselves and our families. There is no true way to find all cases of mass hysteria, especially considering how many may be modern events that we have never looked at under a microscope, but it can be believed that the label of mass hysteria or mass panic is used much lighter than it should be. Cases like the Salem Witch Trials took place hundreds of years ago, and are therefore fascinating because of the differences in our world views and cultures, but why does no one discuss the things that we see in the news everyday and think, *this* is what a mass panic really is. There is an extreme lack of cases when mass hysteria is researched. From generation to generation, we pass down our rational and irrational fears and those fears are very fluid. There is always something to fear, and there is always a panic. At what point do we truly acknowledge what this base terror inside of us is, and how it can control our society?

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