

The Ruthless Plague of Fear

Throughout time, man has been plagued with fear. From wild beasts to bloody swords, smoking rifles to nuclear weapons, the human race has lived in a constant state of crippling fear; the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 were no exception. From the highest court officials to the lowest citizens, fear ran rampant among the hearts of the people, sparking a chaotic drive for religious purification. Fear was the primary perpetrator that forced even the most respected men to choose between living with shame, or dying with dignity.

Before the trials even began, fear had already conquered Salem. When the daughter of Reverend Parris, Betty, became ill, the town immediately began to mumble and spread rumors about witchcraft. Since the scientific knowledge of the late 1600's was very limited, the people had no other method to explain the seemingly unnatural and suspicious phenomenon. However, if fear did not burn so brightly in their hearts, some may have stopped to analyze and interpret the situation in search for a more logical and natural answer.

After Betty became sick, Reverend Parris was frantic to find the cause of her illness. The night before, he had found her, his niece Abigail, and a group of other girls dancing the forest. To add to his suspicions, Abigail's amorphous explanation further reminded him of possible witchcraft. Besides being worried for his daughter's health, he immediately became fearful for his own welfare. Believing that he is a man with many enemies, Parris lived with the constant fear that his reputation would crumble, along with his belongings, career, and life. "...leap not to witchcraft... We cannot leap to witchcraft. They will howl me out of Salem for such corruption in my house." (Reverend Parris, Act 1, page 70). He also believed that in order to gain and maintain the respect of the public, he must uphold his reputation. With Betty ill to a

seemingly unnatural cause and Abigail unwilling to tell the truth, he greatly feared that the people would cry witchcraft and turn against him.

Reverend Parris was not the only person who lived in a constant state of fear. Judge Danforth, the highest official of the court, also feared the loss of his reputation and power. He believed that in order to uphold the power and validity of the court, he must stand strong behind his decisions and show no sympathy to the helpless defendants. "...I will not receive a single plea for pardon or postponement. Them that will not confess will hang...Postponement now speaks a floundering on my part." (Judge Danforth, Act 4, Page 125). Although he knew that he was persecuting innocent victims for a crime that they did not commit, the fear of being overthrown prevented him from reversing or postponing his previous verdicts in the name of justice. In addition, in the minds of the people, the court was holding fair, just trials in the name of the Christianity. However, although he clearly states that there would be no lies in his courtroom, the entire trial, from the initial charge to the final verdict, was a blatant lie. Yet, due to his fear of appearing as a weakling before the people, he could not find the strength to admit that a group of devious children deluded him.

As Parris and Danforth fear for their reputation, Reverend Hale of Beverly feared for his own conscience. As a man with high moral standards, Hale originally arrived in Salem to diagnose the condition of Betty. After actively taking part in such a sinister and unjust act of religious purification, he feared that he would never be able to forgive himself. He committed his greatest sin, however, when he advised the victims to confess to witchcraft simply to stay alive. "...life is God's most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it. I beg you, woman, prevail upon your husband to confess. Let him give his lie."(Reverend Hale, Act 4, Page 126).

Similar to Hale, John Proctor was a proud man with high moral standards. However, his wife, Elizabeth, convinced him to lie and confess to witchcraft in order to save his life. Yet, after giving a complete verbal confession, his fear of living in shame caused him to destroy the signed written confession, ultimately leading to his death. The fear in his heart took his life, but it gave him something even more valuable – his dignity. “He have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!” (Elizabeth Proctor, Act 4, page 132).

During the Salem Witch Trials, 20 innocent victims died for practicing witchcraft, including John Proctor, Giles Corey, and Martha Corey. These people all greatly valued their dignity, and were determined to protect it at all costs. Their actions proved that although life, in theory, is God’s greatest gift, there are certain aspects of life that are not worth compromising, and are truly worth more than life itself. .