

MACMUN 2024



SALEM WITCH TRIALS

Background Guide



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The goal of Model United Nations is to stimulate debate and progressive discussion on topics that may range in sensitivity. Some discussion topics may be triggering or deal with sensitive subject matter, and delegates should keep this in mind when participating in MACMUN 2024.

All attendees are expected to be respectful and courteous to Staff and Secretariat members, as well as other delegates at all times. The dais will immediately call to order delegates who do not abide by this rule. Delegates who feel they are not being treated respectfully are encouraged to raise their concerns with their committee staff or a member of the Secretariat.



Salem Witch Trials

Committee Welcome

Dear Delegates,

As our Committee Chairs, Emmalee and David, and your Crisis Analysts, Janelle, Ella, and Charles – we welcome you to the ninth iteration of McMaster Model United Nations (MACMUN). We are excited to introduce you to a brand-new committee, Salem Witch Trials. Complete with a mysterious murder, peculiar characters, and a drop of magic, this crisis committee is sure to keep you at the edge of your seat all conference long. Our committee will follow the townspeople of Salem in their quest to try to prosecute the witches who are plaguing the town with several macabre happenings. As you'll soon be aware, this committee operates very differently from General Assembly committees and perhaps unlike any MUN experience you have had. Despite this, our team has worked incredibly hard on characters and crises you are sure to enjoy!

As students at McMaster, we come from different years and programs spanning Engineering, Justice, Political Philosophy, and Law (JPPL), and Political Science. We are committed to bringing our varying perspectives to the formation of committee and are excited to witness lively and fruitful debate during the conference. We have several experienced MACMUN staff and some new faces to the club as well, and we are all there to make your experience as enriching as possible. To this end, if you require clarification, have a question, or would even like to pitch a new angle to the debate, do not hesitate to reach out to us via email at salem@macmun.org.

From each of the crises to the various assortment of debates we hope to engage you in, we cannot wait to have you join us in uncovering the mystery of the town of Salem and securing the pursuit of justice, however that comes to you! Your perspectives, ideas, and ingenuity are essential to making your MACMUN experience as off-the-rails as possible, in the best way of course. With that being said, we encourage you to delve deep in your character's backstory and come ready to seek out the true witches of Salem!

Your Salem Staff,

Emmalee Parago, David Saldanha, Charles Tunnard, Janelle Vasagam, Ella Panting
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Introduction

The Salem Witch Trials encompass a period during which Salem, Massachusetts was starkly divided due to differing religious dogmatic beliefs in 1692. The origins of the trials stem from a group of young girls claiming to have been possessed by the devil.¹ As months passed, nearly 150 people would fall victim to baseless accusations and were hung on the authority of the Court of Oyer and Terminer. Suspicion was common in the town of Salem, lauded from and towards citizens on many fronts, including in neighbouring Indigenous tribes and British forces stationed locally. Looming threats like disease made Puritan life riddled with exaggerated anxieties, coinciding with the extreme influence of religion in their daily lives.

A particularly informative aspect of the courts was the consideration given to spectral evidence.² A feature of the court meant that witnesses could testify to the existence of divinity and supernatural forces (both good and bad) that would inform them of individuals guilty of witchcraft.³ This meant that, without proof or confirmation, many people accused of witchcraft would “have visions”, and experience delusions while acting as witnesses to indemnify themselves. One significant example of this was a Caribbean slave, named Tituba, who accused other townspeople of witchcraft. She did so to protect herself against punishment by pledging loyalty to the Christian god, claiming she was attempting to work against evil forces.⁴ The Salem Witch Trials were thrust into the spotlight over 250 years after they took place by Arthur Miller, author of *The Crucible*. His book was received as an allegory reflecting the contemporary period’s Red Scare and accompanying McCarthyism as seeking those the US government believed to be communists.⁵ In Miller’s own writings reflecting on his political struggles with *The Crucible*, a conclusion is reached: when a common enemy is established, people will go to extreme lengths to declare their loyalty to the looming powers.⁶

In this committee, as we seek to relive the debates carried out many centuries ago, it is important to understand the modern relevance of such acts, the implications of our accusations, and the way we allow external influences to determine our morality. Through your assumed character’s objectives, we encourage you to pursue justice with this historical context in mind.

¹ “Salem Witch Trials,” *History.com*, November 4, 2011, <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/salem-witch-trials>.

² Ibid.

³ Nathan Dorn, “Evidence from Invisible Worlds in Salem,” *Library of Congress Blogs*, August 20, 2020, <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2020/08/evidence-from-invisible-worlds-in-salem/>.

⁴ “Salem Witch Trials.”

⁵ Arthur Miller, “Why I Wrote *The Crucible*,” *The New Yorker*, October 13, 1996, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/10/21/why-i-wrote-the-crucible>.

⁶ Ibid.



Committee Mission

As a resident of Salem, it is your responsibility to safeguard your town against forces of danger. A Puritan town committed to the ideals of disavowing sin in all forms, and living a simple, chaste lifestyle. While these beliefs have survived the journey from Europe, it seems as though recently, life is anything but simple. Rumours of witches have reared their ugly heads into places once considered safe. Churches, family homes, and town gatherings seem to hold these beliefs at the helm, but most of all, there is a palatable sense of division in the town. In years past, open accusations of witchcraft, devil sightings, and unspeakable immorality have permeated throughout the town, casting a heavy wave of spite that each citizen feels for their neighbour.

Ultimately, the speculation turns to investigation as a body is found in Salem's Forest one night by two members of the Parris family who stumble upon the remains of the youngest daughter of the Shelby family. Perplexed, they bring the evidence found near the body to the town meeting, which is a diary adorned with the Shelby family crest, the lion and snake. In light of this tragedy, Salem residents demand a trial, as the mayor calls upon his confidant, Harvard-educated lawyer and experienced arbitrator, Thomas Newton.

It falls to you, residents of Salem, to pass judgement on your fellow townspeople, your neighbours, and potentially even your family. It is your solemn duty to rid the town of witchcraft and the many threats on the horizon. Bear witness to the testimony and consider the implications of your actions carefully, many lives "hang" in the balance.



Simulation Style and Composition of the Committee

Two chairs will be present to moderate debate and ensure that a diplomatic environment is maintained, they make up the Dais. The Dais will have the authority to open and close committee sessions, will assist delegates with setting the agenda, and will manage the list of speakers. The Dais will also recognize any points or motions made by delegates on the floor. Delegates must remember that the chairs have the final rule on any disputed points or motions and that all draft resolutions must be approved by the Dais before they are presented before the committee.

Delegates within this committee will represent characters from the Salem Witch Trials, based on the true characters during the original trials. Delegates are permitted to embody their characters and encouraged to act, think, and verbalize their character's true wishes as closely as possible, and to engage other delegates in the same manner. Having said this, research will play a vital role in garnering a better understanding of the political, social, and structural analysis of the town of Salem.

In this committee, we will focus on a singular topic, as opposed to traditional Model United Nations committees that focus on several. In this way, crises, presented by our Crisis Analysts, will become more routine, and will prompt many twists in the function of the committee. We hope you will find them as exciting as we do! Additionally, discussions during the committee sessions will be largely through moderated and unmoderated causes, as communication amongst delegates will prove essential in fulfilling the mandates of the committee. Of course, resolutions, voting on motions, and so on will occur as normal.

The Chairs will open and close each meeting, recognize any points or motions on the floor, set the agenda, and facilitate the discussion. In addition, the Chairs are given the final rule on any disputed points and will declare when motions are to be voted on by the body. It is also the decision of the Chairs to approve any draft resolution to be introduced for debate.

A list of all character sheets will be emailed to you, in which all character information can be found, including biographical accounts, potentially damning accounts of odd behaviour, and one's role in community life and welfare. We advise each delegate to look through the character sheets thoroughly to develop their crisis arcs.



History

Originating in the Protestant Church of England, the Puritans were a group that broke away from the Church, believing it to be too Catholic, hierarchical, and incapable of enacting sufficient reforms.⁷ This put them at odds with the Church and the State, as the sitting monarch of England led the Church of England. Therefore, in 1630, the Puritans set forth towards America on the ship *Arabella*, landing in New England and establishing the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the town they named Boston.⁸

Puritanism is a theology based on Calvinism, which places the sovereignty of God above all, and asserts the authority of the Bible.⁹ Puritan religious theology asserts the innate sinfulness of mankind and dictates that a select few will be saved despite the sins they have committed. Thus, as people were considered innately sinful, Puritans believed people could only achieve good through intense self-discipline, introspection, self-examination of sins, and hard work. An important tenet of Puritanism emphasizes strict moral discipline, holding that acts such as blasphemy, drunkenness, playing games of luck, and participation in theatrical performances be penal offences.¹⁰ Puritans believed that all sins, of any degree, should be punished, as they represented the presence of the Devil amongst them. As each person faced this struggle between good and evil, the Puritans believed that the Devil chose to prey on those considered weak at the time in society, such as women, children and the mentally ill. Those who followed Satan were considered to be witches, and in Puritan ideology, witchcraft was one of the gravest crimes a person could commit.¹¹

During the late 1600s, dominating puritan religious and societal rules shaped the political context of American and English Colonies. Puritans' belief in witchcraft being the devils work became such a widespread concern that it was soon a felony in English law to practice any forms of witchcraft. This law led to one of the most horrifying witch hunts in Massachusetts during the 1690s.¹² The hunt resulted in numerous innocent people being executed with visions, dreams and even spiritual testimony being considered as valid evidence.

The Witchcraft Act of 1609 was one of the primary English laws which ultimately deemed witchcraft of any kind a felony.¹³ The Body of Liberties was the first legal code in New England

⁷ "People and Ideas: Early American Groups," *PBS: American Experience*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/godinamerica-early-american-groups/>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ J. Lyden, "Puritanism: Christian Ethics – Protestant," *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, no. 2 (1998).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Berkshire Law Library, "Witchcraft law up to the Salem witch trials of 1692," *Massachusetts Law Updates* (blog), *Mass.gov*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.mass.gov/news/witchcraft-law-up-to-the-salem-witchcraft-trials-of-1692>.



where witchcraft was a capital offence.¹⁴ Based on very flawed and arbitrary laws, it only took one or two testimonies or confessions, even coerced or outright false, to execute someone under the crime of practicing witchcraft. These laws resulted in approximately 10,000 deaths.¹⁵

The law sought out punishment for witches, particularly targeting women as a ‘corrupting force’. Witches have historically been defined as the “evil aspects of femininity” as written in a handbook in the 15th century with instructions on how to find and kill witches. Many young girls were executed for their ‘visions,’ that might have been epilepsy or mental illness, and were instead diagnosed by a doctor as “bewitchment”.

The predominant Puritan society were strict in their practices to protestant and Calvinist beliefs. This belief in divine salvation targeted anyone who did not conform to Puritan ways.¹⁶ Violators were labelled as witches and their executions were justified because they were ‘working for the devil.’¹⁷ The Puritan religion was a God-fearing patriarchal society that was ready to fight to maintain its way of life and sustain its belief system by hunting down and executing anyone who would disobey their practices.¹⁸

The persecution of witches has not always been a practice encouraged by the religious institutions of Christianity. From the 10th to 15th century, the stance was that witches did not exist, with Pope Alexander IV even declaring prosecution for witchcraft forbidden in 1258. However, attitudes changed around 1550. From 1560 - 1630 over 4,000 people were prosecuted, and by the 1700s, that number had increased to 80,000, over half of whom were executed.¹⁹ Though they happened at the end of the witch hunting craze, the Salem Witch Trials are famous for their severity and the fervor behind persecution.²⁰ One aspect behind the severe number of persecutions is the poor handling of trials and evidence, such as the admittance of spectral evidence or the scrutiny falling on the defendant’s testimony rather than the accuser.²¹ The first accusation began after a group of girls had been diagnosed with a condition beyond medicine; their symptoms of convulsions, disruptive behaviour, and random screaming were deemed to be the acts of witches given power by the Devil.²² Several different factors have been attributed to the paranoia that led to the escalation of the Salem Witch Trials, such as the role of the ministers, refugees from King

¹⁴ Berkshire Law Library, “Witchcraft law up to the Salem witch trials of 1692.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lyden, “Puritanism.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Peter T. Leeson and Jacob W. Russ, “Witch Trials,” *The Economic Journal* 128, no. 613 (2017): 2066. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eoj.12498>.

²⁰ Jess Blumberg, “A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 23, 2007, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-brief-history-of-the-salem-witch-trials-175162489/>.

²¹ Selina Anne Fensom, “Witch Hunter: The Impact and The Impact and Influence Of The Reverend Samuel Parris On The Salem Village Witch Trials 1692,” MA diss., (University of New England, 2002).

²² Michael Brown, “The Salem Witch Trials: Dehumanizing the Different,” *The Histories* 15, no. 1 (2019): 3.



William's War, ergot poisoning, rivalries between families, and economic downturn.²³ In the end, more than 300 people were accused of witchcraft and over 20 executed for it.²⁴ The Salem Witch Trials remain in public consciousness till this day, due to their brutal nature and the paranoia of the masses.

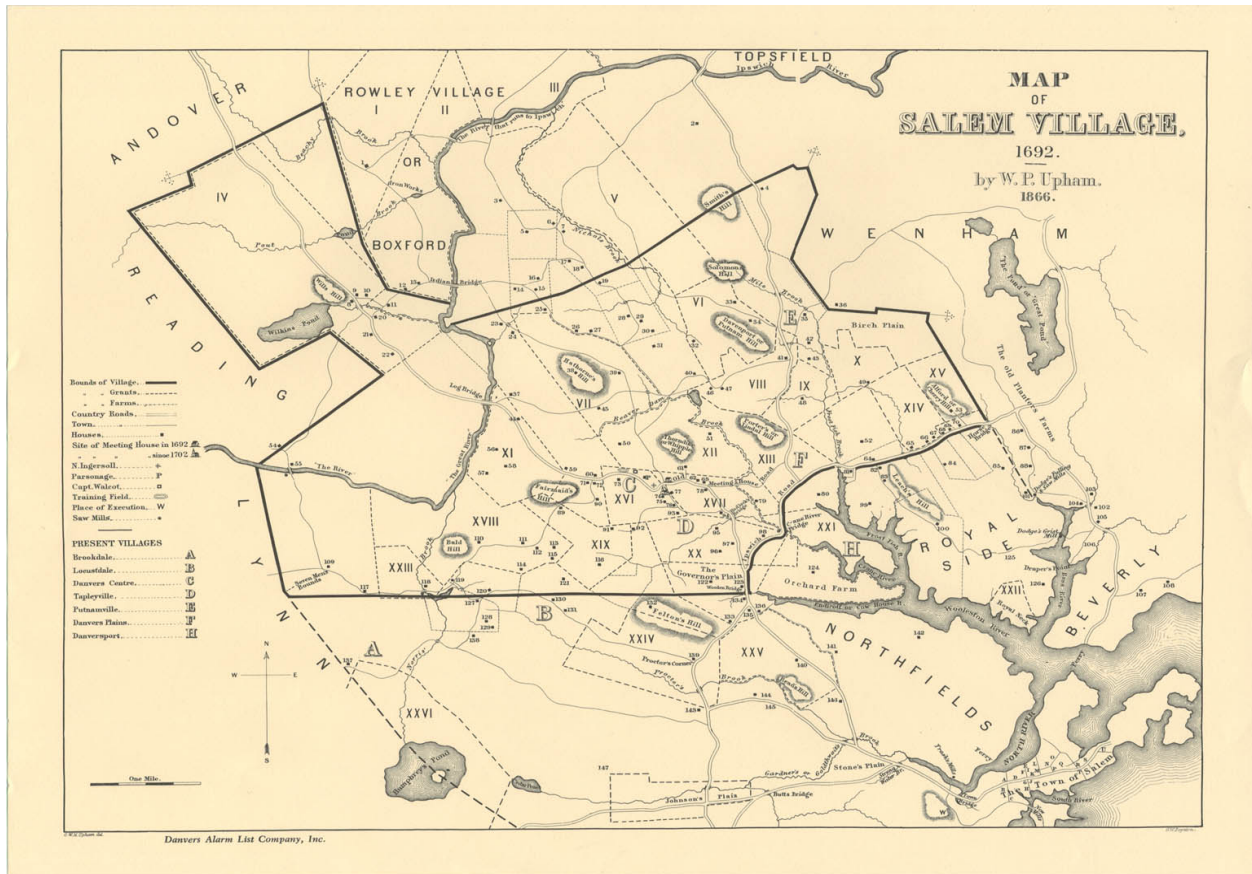


Figure 1: Map of Salem Village from <https://salem.lib.virginia.edu/maps/index.html>

Houses were wood frame residences, either containing two rooms and two stories with an end chimney, or an expansion of that with four rooms, two stories and a central chimney. The chimneys were made of stone or brick, the houses had timber frames for support, and walls were made of clapboard and trim.²⁵ An example of a typical house in the Salem Village is the Corwin House, which is a historical house that has been turned into a museum for the Salem Witch Trials.²⁶

²³ Fensom, "Witch Hunter"; Sean Purdy, "Conjuring history: the many interpretations of the Salem witchcraft trials," *Rivier Academic Journal* 3, no. 1 (2007): 2-3; Vicki Saxon, "What Caused the Salem Witch Trials?" *JSTOR Daily*, October 27, 2015, <https://daily.jstor.org/caused-salem-witch-trials/>; Blumberg, "A Brief History"

²⁴ Blumberg, "A Brief History."

²⁵ Bryant Franklin Tolles and Carolyn K. Tolles, *Architecture in Salem: An Illustrated Guide* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 19983

²⁶ *Ibid.*



Current Situation

The residents of Salem hold traditional, weekly meetings for the sake of discussing any issues or concerns that may affect the town. Held in the city hall to anyone who chooses to attend, meetings are scheduled for Friday nights and are usually casual events with open dialogue. The focus of this week's town meeting revolves around the peculiar and supernatural incidents that have unfolded in the past few days. Everyone in Salem, including the Shelbys, the Parris', the Bennets, and the Gardiners, are gathered in the Derby Mansion as the Mayor deliberates how the town must address these occurrences. Tension has been building between the village members out of suspicion of witchcraft. This causes the meeting to be awkwardly silent until Charlie and Martha, the only two children from the Parris family, burst through the doors of the town hall with information about a murder. The adolescent children claim they have an anonymous diary containing detailed entries confessing to the murder of Margot Emdee, the Mayor's daughter. The Paris children, who were absent earlier in the meeting, explain that their truancy was due to the discovery of Margot's body in the woods. This led them to the trail where the diary was found. Although Margot was a kind soul, her deviant behaviour drew controversy for her outspoken views, something unseen in young women. She advocated for all to learn the value of reading and writing, and influenced her father to fund a school, though her vision of a secular school was shot down and instead, a Puritan education program was started. Many suspect that Margot's progressive ideals are what lead to her murder.

Prior to the Friday meeting, most members of the town had been spreading rumours about involvement in devil worship and sorcery. Four families, the Shelbys, the Parris, the Bennets, and the Gardiners, are constantly brought up throughout the scuttlebutt, leading to heightened attention around them and speculation of the practice of witchcraft.

The Parris family was put under scrutiny as other town members claimed to see the children, Charlie and Martha, exploring the woods late at night and not returning until early the next morning. The older brother, Charlie, is usually a generous and kind teenage boy, while the younger daughter, Martha, is often in trouble for her rebellious nature. People in the town suspect that they are engaged in unholy and dark activities, which has led to their isolation from other children. Furthermore, the Parris' good relationships with fellow families have been crumbling as their maid has been relentlessly accused of cursing at people in the street and mumbling verses from a book of black magic.

Another family caught in the suspicion is the Shelbys. Members consist of Frank Shelby, the father; Helen Shelby, the mother; Elizabeth Shelby, the eldest daughter; Francis Shelby, the middle child; and Abigail Shelby, the youngest daughter. Both parents have openly accused other townsfolk of witchcraft while profusely defending their daughters from any of the allegations. However, the three daughters, all very close in age, have been exhibiting strange and eerie behaviour. Elizabeth and Francis have only been seen together for the past week, holding hands



and only interacting with one another. The thriving Shelby carpentry business has been unusually slow as people refuse to buy any of their highly crafted wooden items. Francis, a generally talkative and social young girl, has generated the most gossip from her suddenly withdrawn attitude. Frank and Helen had to go as far as to keep Francis hidden within their house after reports of her uncanny, catatonic-like state for the past several days.

The Bennets, three generations of seamstress women, have been supplying the town with reliable clothing for the past three decades. Their business is well-known amongst all townspeople which has allowed them to leverage discounts from regular clients who also have businesses, such as the Gardiner family's farm products, and wood supplies from the Shelby family's carpentry. These connections have been severed as Emily, Savannah, and Aria Bennet (grandmother, mother, and granddaughter respectively, have shut down their tailor shop to protect themselves from any witchcraft accusations. Ever since their temporary closure, their extreme measures to remain out of the rumours have only drawn in more suspicion, with some townsfolk believing to see ghostly figures in their store and a dark shadow surrounding it.

The last group involved in the controversy is the Gardiner family. Known as Salem's largest family farmers, they own the greatest plot of land and are in contact with most people in the town. Jamie Gardiner, their only son, greatly helped with the duties and tending of the farm, which earned him the trust of all neighbours or anyone who bought stock. However, since a recent incident involving Jamie being caught spitting on animals, members of the town are suspicious he is practicing devil worship. This has led to his banishment from many stores and public places in town.

The horrific events of the town meeting must now be resolved and depend on the ability of the town people to open an investigation against the main feuding families and create a trial, complete with judge and jury, to find the murderer and ultimately determine if witchcraft has infiltrated the town of Salem or if another mysterious cause is behind the murder and mass hysteria. After harsh threats were made by the mayor, immediate action was taken by him— a trained lawyer – to summon Chief Justice William Stoughton from Harvard University to be appointed as an unbiased, and highly educated judge for what is to be known as “The Salem Witch Trials.”



Committee Representatives

Charlie Parris (older brother)

After finding gruesome evidence of the town's murder, Charlie's parents are very suspicious of him and barely speak to him anymore. He tried to run away after the town meeting on Friday but was caught and is now on trial to testify against the mayor's daughter, a childhood friend of his.

Martha Parris (younger sister)

The youngest to be accused, Abigail is extremely scared to be on trial and has grown suspiciously quiet. She only admits to one thing, that being that her brother found the body alone and told her about it afterward so he wouldn't get in trouble. Despite this confession, she is a known liar, and many are skeptical of her, even at her young age.

Emily Bennet (grandmother)

Emily already carries a reputation for being a "psychic" old lady as she would often give accurate and unpredictable advice to customers regarding events that would happen in the near future. As soon as the trials began, she shut down her seamstress business, as she firmly believes that dark magic is being practiced and does not trust anyone else in town. She is now being blamed of practicing witchcraft herself, by cursing all the garments she sells with dark magic. She profusely denies all these claims and is now on trial for banning the mayor's daughter from her store before she was even convicted of murder, leading many to believe that she is covering something up.

Aria Bennet (granddaughter)

Aria firmly accuses Elizabeth Shelby of partaking in dark magic even though she has been known to be very close with her for their entire lives. Her mother and grandmother are concerned about her abrupt cutting of ties with Elizabeth, yet she seems to not care and has even volunteered to testify against her for the trials. Aria herself is being put on trial as she is rumoured to be secretly meeting up with Elizabeth in the woods late at night.

Jamie Gardiner (son)

Jamie, member of the Gardiner Family who are farmers, is the best friend of Francis Shelby and worried that he hasn't seen her in a while, causing him to be violent at home and during work. He suspects that the Parris siblings have something to do with her disappearance and explicitly blames them for the mayhem within the town by spreading rumours about them to everyone he speaks to.

Dr. Oliver Monroe (Physician)

Dr. Oliver Monroe is an educated villager with a scientific mind that sets him against the most austere religious members of the community. His practicality and need for investigation have shunned him from many social circles, instead preferring to practice medicine on the outskirts of town. Despite his less than stellar reputation, nearly every towns person makes a trip to the doctor



to combat one of their many ailments. Dr. Monroe attends every town meeting, advocating his opinions and secretly plotting to form a secular order within the Puritan dominated Salem.



Research & Preparation Questions

1. From a legal perspective of the Trials, how was spectral evidence presented and considered? Did stereotypes and gender norms play a role in who may have been considered a witch and who may have been deemed innocent? How did these biases intersect and affect community members during the trial?
2. How did the religious and social climate in 17th-century New England contribute to the outbreak of the Salem Witch Trials? How did the qualities of intolerance, fear, and insecurity lead hundreds of people to partake in events and accusations they objectively know to be untrue? With this understanding, what can be said about the role of the religion on the individual person against the dignity of their fellow citizen?
3. In establishing a profile of those who were convicted, which commonalities of character and personality did the supposed “witches” have in common? How can this inform your characters view of who they believe to be a witch?
4. Did texts like the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and other emerging means of dispensing information affect the coverage of the trials? As a largely literate society, how would reverence to religious texts have been weighed against the importance of oral testimony from accusers? Would their age, experience, and motivations have played a factor in doubting the validity of their spectral accounts?
5. How could external events, including colonization, isolation, and reports of war in Europe have affected a predominantly austere society? Could a sense of social rebellion have prompted young adults and children in Salem to revolt against their timid community?
6. How did the origins of the Salem Witch Trials differ from other international witch trials? Do these distinctions have a significant impact on the trials in Salem? How does the concept of mass hysteria play a role in the trials?