

Unit 1 Reading Comprehension

I. Identify the Passive Form structures in the text. Underline them.

The Salem Witch Trials (Extract from the video script)

Salem was settled in 1626 by Puritans, a group of English protestants. Life was strict and isolated for the people of Salem. Battles with their Native American neighbors and groups of French settlers were commonplace. People feared starvation and disease, and relations between villagers were strained. To make matters worse, 1692 brought one of the coldest winters on record.

That winter, two cousins, 9-year-old Betty Parris and 11-year-old Abigail Williams started behaving very strangely. A physician found nothing physically wrong — but diagnosed the girls as under “an evil hand.”

As news swept through the village, the symptoms appeared to spread. Accounts describe 12 so-called “afflicted” girls contorting their bodies, having fits, and complaining of prickling skin. Soon three local women were accused of tormenting them.

All three of the accused were considered outsiders in some way. On February 29th, the authorities arrested Sarah Good, a poor pregnant mother of a young daughter, Sarah Osbourne, who had long been absent from church, and Tituba, an enslaved. Tituba denied harming the girls at first. But then she confessed to practicing witchcraft on the Devil’s orders and charged Good and Osbourne with having forced her.

These three victims were just the beginning. As accusations multiplied, others, like Tituba, made false confession to save themselves. The authorities even reportedly told one accused witch that she would be hanged if she did not confess, and freed if she did. They were not particularly interested in thoroughly investigating the charges— in keeping with their Church’s teachings, they preferred that the accused confessed, asked for forgiveness, and promised not to engage in more witchcraft.

The court accepted all kinds of evidence, including so-called “spectral evidence” in which the girls began talking irrationally when they were supposedly touched by invisible ghosts. Complicating matters further, many of the jurors in the trials were relatives of the accusers, compromising their objectivity. Those who dared to speak out came under suspicion.

By the spring of 1693, over a hundred people had been imprisoned, and 14 women and 6 men had been executed. By this time, accusations were starting to spread beyond Salem to neighboring communities, and even the most powerful figures were targets.

Some have speculated that the girls were suffering from hallucinations caused by fungus; or a condition that caused swelling of the brain. But ultimately, the reason for their behavior is unknown. What we do know is that adults accepted wild accusations which were made by children as hard evidence. Today, the Salem Witch Trials remain a cautionary tale of the dangers of groupthink and the power of fear to manipulate human perception.

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II. Work in groups. Answer the following questions.

1. What do you think were the particular factors (social, economic, political, etc.) that allowed such a paranoid behavior in the Salem villagers?

2. The Salem Witch Trials are considered an infamous case of mass hysteria. Can you think about other examples in which innocent people were hunted by the community and falsely accused of something?

3. In Salem, 14 of the 19 people found guilty of and executed for witchcraft during 1692 were women. Most Puritans who claimed to be victims of witchcraft were also female. What role do you think gender plays in the witchcraft accusations?
