

Jessy Nolet

Roxanne Rimstead

Women Writers, ANG 553

2 April 2009

Witch Burning in the United States: The Salem Witch Trials

In medieval Europe, Christians believed that Satan was a real being and that he was involved in human affairs. They believed that Satan's ultimate goals were "the corruption of humanity, the destruction of everything good, and the damnation of as many people as possible in hell" (Cline 1). It was believed that Satan accomplished this by using human agents to whom he gave supernatural powers (Cline 1).



Witches were easily categorized as servants of Satan. They were targeted for "prosecution as slaves of the cosmic enemy of God, Jesus, and Christianity" (Cline 1). Rather than a healer or a teacher, the witch was made into an instrument of evil. The Church warned its followers of the dangers of freethinking women and instructed the clergy how to locate, torture, and destroy them. These women who were labelled as "witches" by the Church included female scholars, priestesses, gypsies, mystics, nature lovers, herb gatherers, and any women suspiciously close to the natural world (Purkiss 12). Midwives were also killed for their practice of using medical knowledge to ease the pain of childbirth — a suffering that was considered to be "God's rightful punishment for Eve's partaking of the apple of Knowledge" according to Christianity (Purkiss 14).

"The creation of the concept of devil-worship, followed by its persecution, allowed the Church to more easily subordinate people to authoritarian control and openly denigrate women" (Cline 1). Most of what was considered to be witchcraft was in fact a fictional creation of the Church. The Church's creation of witchcraft and devil-worship has "exacted a

heavy and bloody toll on humanity which still has not yet been fully paid” (Cline 1). The Church authorities tortured and killed thousands of women in order to make them confess “that they flew through the sky, had sexual relations with demons, turned into animals, and engaged in various sorts of black magic” (Cline 2).

As most Americans know, witch hunts affected the American colonies. The Salem witch trials have “entered American consciousness as being much more than just the killing of witches” (Cline 3). In fact, like the trials in Europe, the Salem witch trials have become a symbol. The witch trials have become a symbol that represents what can go wrong when “ignorant people go crazy, especially when egged on by just as ignorant and/or power hungry leaders” (Cline 3). The Salem story began in 1692, when a few women became friendly with a slave named Tituba and began to act in a very strange way. For instance, the women would scream hysterically, fall into convulsions, and bark like dogs. Soon, they were considered to be possessed by demons and three women, including Tituba, were accused of witchcraft. “The result was much like the European experience, with a chain-reaction of confessions, denouncements, and more arrests” (Cline 3). The women who were killed were not those who submitted obediently to Church authorities. Only those who were rebellious and disobedient were put to death. If a woman admitted being a witch, she had a greater chance of surviving. If a woman denied being a witch and insisted that she had rights, she was quickly executed (Cline 3).

The burning of witches never actually took place in the United States. Instead, the women were put to death by means of hanging or beheading. In the end, nineteen accused witches were executed at Gallows Hill and one man was crushed to death with stone weights. It is thought that thirteen other accused witches died in jail. The religious and political authorities clearly used the witch trials to impose their own ideas of order upon the local

people. “As in Europe, violence was a tool used by religion and religious people to enforce uniformity and conformity in the face of dissent and social disorder” (Cline 3).



Witch hunts & persecution in America: Salem as an iconic symbol of social persecution



Witchcraft & Satanism: Linking witches & Satan out of ignorance, to encourage fear and hatred

Related Links:

“The Witch-Burning,” short poem by Simone Dawson-Walker:

<http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.usherbrooke.ca/lrc/pdf?vid=4&hid=3&sid=5450485a-03df-4eaa-9637-c287529a3e1e%40sessionmgr7>

The Victims of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692:

<http://www.salemwitchtrials.com/victims.html>

Works Cited

Cline, Austin. "Witches, Women, and Witchcraft: Salem and the Modern Witch-Hunt,"

About.com, 2001, 1-4.

Cline, Austin. "Witches, Misogyny, and Patriarchy: Clerical Torture of Women: How

Misogynistic Attitudes Fed the Fear of Witches," *About.com*, 2001, 1-4.

Purkiss, Diane. "A Holocaust of One's Own: The Myth of the Burning Times," *Witch in*

History, 1996, 5-29.

Purkiss, Diane. "The Witch in the Hands of Historians: A Tale of Prejudice and Fear," *Witch*

in History, 1996, 59-88.