

Traumatic Spaces: Nathaniel Hawthorne and the 1692 Salem Witch Trials

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Hawthorne, Salem, and Collective Trauma

- In 1804, American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, MA., a descendant of John Hathorne, one of the judges presiding over the infamous Witch Trials of 1692, in which 19 innocent people were hanged. As we learn more about the relationship between trauma and literature, we can gain understanding about the ways in which the victims of trauma process their emotional responses. We also know that trauma can be experienced by an entire community. In Hawthorne’s case, growing up in the midst of a town known for this grim event inflected his fiction with horror and deep disillusionment.

- This research project rests on the belief that the collective trauma experienced by the Salem community impacted not only individuals but also the identity of the town, a trauma passed down to descendants like Hawthorne. We argue that the town’s natural and manmade environments, even the most banal touristic attractions, attest to the enduring social and cultural effects of this history of collective trauma.

“Where superstition won her darkest triumph”

(“Alice Doane’s Appeal” 3)

Sight Sacralization: Gallows Hill (now Proctor’s Ledge)

- In “Alice Doane’s Appeal,” the narrator takes two women on a tour of Gallows Hill, site of the witchcraft hangings. They stand at a site that has been identified as particularly for tourists, something Dean MacCannell describes as *sight sacralization*. Sight sacralization asks the question, “what makes a place a must-see?” The narrator believes that Gallows Hill is a place that one *must* see while in Salem—standing on the execution site while listening to the narrator’s horrifying account of the hangings both fascinates and repels the two women listeners.
- On our trip to Salem, we visited all the “must-see” places, like Proctor’s Ledge, the Salem Witch Museum, and the House of the Seven Gables. Many of the tours we enjoyed in Salem used this storytelling type of literary tourism to engage the audience. Each site had its own story and identity that made them easy to connect with. Critic Charles Baraw says that when literary tourism is used, “it is not a tale that presents an unmediated ‘truth’ but rather another version of history touristically conceived” (98). As we spoke to a docent at The House of the Seven Gables, he confided in us about the inaccuracy of some of the tours in Salem. He said he knows that tourists are looking for a good story, therefore some of the tours are more dramatic than others, but may not have historically accurate information.
- For instance, none of the sites we visited or the tours we participated in denied the existence of witches in Salem in 1692.



Place Studies: Salem and Tourism

The way a community responds to an act of trauma is a direct reflection of its resiliency. More specifically, when we considered the coping mechanisms of contemporary Salem, Massachusetts, it seemed undoubtedly true that the community was forever changed by the Trials. Now it chooses to capitalize on its traumatic past history through the cultivation of attractions that draw many visitors. By reading the works of Salem’s native, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and visiting the sites of Salem, we began to find out *exactly* how collective trauma can affect the social, cultural, and historical well-being of a community.

Witchcraft shapes community relationships in “Young Goodman Brown,” as the protagonist leaves his wife Faith behind to enter the dark woods, where he discovers that all the pious residents of Salem are actually in league with the devil. The trauma of this realization embitters Brown and alienates him from all his fellow citizens, including his own wife. In visiting Salem, we were curious to see whether residents still felt the same stain of corruption that depresses and disillusion Brown.

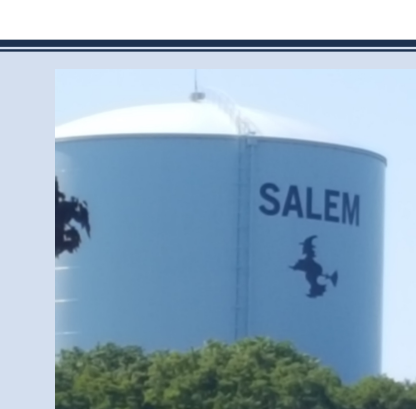
Hawthorne’s story “The Minister’s Black Veil” also approaches the issue of collective trauma, this time through clergyman Mr. Hooper, who suddenly appears to his congregation wearing a black veil, to symbolize the innate sinfulness that every human possesses. Although this story does not take place in Salem, it is still clearly about Hawthorne’s preoccupation with a sinful human nature.

In the wake of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, the community of contemporary Salem carries on. As we were informed by a docent at the House of the Seven Gables, the community reacts in different ways to the collective trauma of 1692. Some businesses like the Witch Museum, the Dairy Witch, and Witch Pix choose to capitalize on the horrific trials while other locations in the community, like Proctor’s Ledge and the Witch Memorial, tend to honor the accused and commemorate their lives. Modern-day Salem does not “shun” those who choose to believe or not believe in witches, and some tourists come there in search of witches and spells. Nonetheless, regardless of whether or not one believes in witches, the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 forever changed the social, cultural, and historical well-being of the community.



Staged Authenticity: Salem’s Tourist Sites

- The Witch Memorial and Proctor’s Ledge were both somber and dignified means of representing the victims of the Witch Trials. These sites made clear the lingering trauma shared by the town as both were constructed relatively recently.
- MacCannell discusses **staged authenticity**, a tactic used to make tourists believe that they are seeing and receiving the real, authentic experience. For example, at the Salem Witch Museum, where mannekins were posed in recreated “scenes” to dramatize key events. We unanimously decided that it was a kitsch destination with limited information for people who are truly interested in and the Witch Trials and therefore, it was not an authentic destination for us.
- Another destination, the House of the Seven Gables, had the opposite effect on us the docent set the scene by describing a resident who loved the “secret staircase” in Hawthorne’s novel *The House of the Seven Gables* so much so that she built a “secret staircase” in the chimney. The docent then opened a very small door to reveal the staircase. All of us “oohed” and “aahed” and the docent instructed us to “climb the stairs at once!” This felt like a secret piece of the house that only we would get to access, but in reality, hundreds of people just like us had climbed that same staircase on that particular day.
- One souvenir item that we all personally disliked was the “warrant of arrest” one can purchase for a laugh and send to their family or friends.



Conclusions

- The influence of the collective trauma caused by the Witch Trials is evident in Salem today. Some residents view capitalizing on the Witch Trials as a direct insult to the victims, and others see it as a coping mechanism to deal with collective trauma or as a necessary remedy for the declining local economy.
- It should not come as a surprise that Salem capitalizes on its history—it is known as the “Witch City” after all—but it was a surprise that shops sell t-shirts with the names of the victims on the back like they went on a world concert tour; souvenirs like these underplay the atrocity of the hangings, turning human suffering and death into consumer products.

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