Asking Pardon of Men: Samuel Sewall and Responsibility

Full Lesson Plan

COMPELLING QUESTION

How can you take responsibility for your decisions, whether they are good or bad?

VIRTUE

Responsibility

DEFINITION

Responsibility is accountability to myself and others.

LESSON OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will learn about Samuel Sewall’s role in the Salem Witch Trials and how he later took responsibility for his actions. They will read and reflect on the narrative about Sewall and participate in a skit where they will write roles for themselves as though they were a part of the trials to understand how they can act responsibly no matter what the circumstances.

OBJECTIVES

• Students will analyze Samuel Sewall’s experiences of acting responsibly.
• Students will understand the importance of acting with responsibility in their own lives.

BACKGROUND

In early 1692, two young girls in Salem, Massachusetts were suffering fits and convulsions, prompting their parents to call a doctor. The girls claimed that three witches were responsible for their ailment. The number of afflicted grew over the next several months, all of whom accused more people of witchcraft. Sir William Phips, the governor of Massachusetts, appointed a special court to try the cases. Throughout the summer, twenty suspected witches and wizards were executed, despite the governor, ministers, and some of the judges questioning the validity of evidence brought against the accused. The Salem Witch Trials formally came to an end in October when the governor disbanded the court.
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<th>VOCABULARY</th>
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<tr>
<td>Abomination</td>
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<td>Spectral evidence</td>
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<td>Transgressions</td>
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<th>INTRODUCE TEXT</th>
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<td>Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the Compelling Question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.</td>
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<th>WALK-IN-THE-SHOES QUESTIONS</th>
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<td>As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.</td>
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<td>• What challenges are you facing?</td>
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<td>• What fears or concerns might you have?</td>
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<td>• What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?</td>
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<td>Who is Samuel Sewall? What was Sewall's role in the Salem Witch Trials? How did this role affect his identity during and after the trials?</td>
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<td>• Based on Sewall's role at the trials, what was his purpose in life? Did he live up to that purpose?</td>
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<td>• What was Sewall's purpose in his speech to the congregation? How did this change his identity?</td>
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<th>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS</th>
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<td>Discuss the following questions with your students.</td>
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<td>• What is the historical context of the narrative?</td>
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<td>• What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?</td>
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<td>• How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?</td>
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<td>• How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?</td>
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<td>• How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?</td>
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<td>• What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?</td>
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<td>• Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?</td>
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller
- “The Crucible” film, 1996
- Discovery Channel, “The Salem Witchcraft Trials”
- Salem Witchcraft Trials, 1692, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, https://famous-trials.com/salem
In early 1692, two young girls in Salem, Massachusetts were suffering fits and convulsions, prompting their parents to call a doctor. The girls claimed that three witches were responsible for their ailment. The number of afflicted grew over the next several months, all of whom accused more people of witchcraft. Sir William Phips, the governor of Massachusetts, appointed a special court to try the cases. Throughout the summer, twenty suspected witches and wizards were executed, despite the governor, ministers, and some of the judges questioning the validity of evidence brought against the accused. The Salem Witch Trials formally came to an end in October when the governor disbanded the court.

Governor Phips appointed merchant Samuel Sewall to serve on a special court to investigate an outbreak of witchcraft in Salem in May 1692. Witchcraft was considered an abomination in Puritan-dominated Massachusetts; residents believed it invited evil into the society.

Sewall was a successful merchant and possessed a high social standing as a community leader. He was an immigrant from England who attended Harvard College and graduated with a bachelor's and a master's degree in divinity. Sewall married the daughter of a wealthy merchant and soon inherited the business. Sewall was also a highly devout Puritan who was accepted as a member of Old South Church. He read the Bible daily, hosted prayer meetings in his home, served the music ministry, and baptized his own children.

Sewall also saw himself as one of the guardians of social order; he frequently complained in his diary about the decline of public morality. Sewall served in many civic offices including official printer of the colony, a representative in the Massachusetts assembly, a captain of the militia, an overseer of Harvard, and a night watchman to enforce Boston’s curfew.

The trials that Sewall helped oversee were controversial from the beginning. Many of the afflicted girls who made accusations submitted “spectral evidence.” This included visions and sounds that had no physical evidence of occurring. The accusers claimed they came from the spiritual world. Amid the growing hysteria over the possibility of witches living in the community, the court accepted spectral evidence. Many of the accused would be condemned to death based on invisible evidence that could not be proven or disproven.
Jails were jammed with suspected witches, and executions continued in June, July, and August. In July, a woman who was found guilty named Sarah Good told Sewall, “I am no more a witch than you are a wizard. If you take my life away, God will give you blood to drink.”

Multiple pastors spoke out against the unfair trials as the number of accused continued to grow. Chief Justice Saltonstall resigned from the court in disgust, but the rest of the body still sentenced more than a dozen witches to be executed in August and September.

In October, the trials finally came to a halt. Too many people were accused of witchcraft to be reasonable, and the accusations had reached the pious and wealthy, including the governor’s wife. Governor Phips disbanded the court and relieved Sewall of his duties. The Massachusetts assembly called for a “day of fasting and prayer” for divine guidance and reflection about the trials.

Sewall recoiled in horror at what he had done and was tormented for years by the guilt. Five years later, he willingly accepted responsibility for his actions. On January 14, 1697, he entered Third Church to honor a “day of fasting and prayer.” After the congregation sang a psalm, the minister walked to the pulpit, only pausing to receive a note from Sewall. The repentant merchant rose silently and stood with his head bowed while the minister read his public apology. Sewall’s note stated that he “[desired] to take the blame and shame of [the trials].” He “[asked] the pardon of men, and especially [desired] prayers for God.” He begged God to forgive him for all of his sins, bowed deeply to his fellow congregants, and sat.

Sewall had participated in an injustice in 1692 but later accepted responsibility for his actions. He was the only judge from the special court to publicly apologize for the role he played in the witchcraft trials.