Asking Pardon of Men: Samuel Sewall and Responsibility

- **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 took responsibility for his actions afterward. 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 with 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 strange fits and convulsions, which alarmed their parents, one of whom called a doctor. The girls said they were afflicted by three witches including a West Indian slave, Tituba, who confessed to practicing witchcraft. The number of afflicted and accused witches grew into the hundreds over the next several months. A new governor of Massachusetts appointed a special court to try the cases. Throughout the summer, twenty suspected witches and wizards were executed, even though the governor, ministers, and some of the judges questioned the use of spectral evidence, or unseen spirits. The Salem Witch Trials formally came to an end in October when the governor disbanded the court, though the Puritans continued to believe in witchcraft and the evil it was said to cause.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Abomination
  - Self-righteous
  - Spectral evidence
  - Depose
  - Spectral
  - Transgressions

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
  - Who is Samuel Sewall? What is Sewall’s role in the Salem Witch Trials? How does this role affect his identity during and after the trials?
  - Based on Sewall’s role at the trials, what is his purpose? Did he live up to that purpose?
  - What was Sewall’s purpose in his speech to the congregation? How did this change his identity?
• **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

• **Additional Resources**
  - *The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller
  - "The Crucible" film, 1996
  - Discovery Channel, "The Salem Witchcraft Trials"
  - History Channel, "Salem Witch Trials", [http://www.history.com/topics/salem-witch-trials](http://www.history.com/topics/salem-witch-trials)
  - Salem Witchcraft Trials, 1692, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, [http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/SALEM.HTM](http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/SALEM.HTM)
Handout A: Asking Pardon of Men: Samuel Sewall and Responsibility

Background

In early 1692, two young girls in Salem, Massachusetts were suffering strange fits and convulsions, which alarmed their parents, one of whom called a doctor. The girls said they were afflicted by three witches including a West Indian slave, Tituba, who confessed to practicing witchcraft. The number of afflicted and accused witches grew into the hundreds over the next several months. A new governor of Massachusetts appointed a special court to try the cases. Throughout the summer, twenty suspected witches and wizards were executed, even though the governor, ministers, and some of the judges questioned the use of spectral evidence, or unseen spirits. The Salem Witch Trials formally came to an end in October when the governor disbanded the court, though the Puritans continued to believe in witchcraft and the evil it was said to cause.

Narrative

The new royal governor, Sir William Phips, appointed merchant Samuel Sewall to serve on a special Court of Oyer and Terminer to investigate an outbreak of witchcraft in Salem in May 1692. Sewall accepted the assignment without complaint. After all, the practice of witchcraft was considered an abomination in Puritan-dominated Massachusetts and threatened to invite evil into the society. Sewall was a successful merchant and leader in the community with a high social standing who saw himself as one of the guardians of the social order, preserving it from any disruption. Little did he know that the outcome of the witchcraft trials would lead to him publicly repenting for his role.

Sewall was an immigrant from England who attended Harvard College and graduated with a bachelor’s and a master's degree in divinity. He married the daughter of a wealthy merchant and soon inherited the business. Sewall was also a highly devout Puritan who underwent a conversion experience and thus was accepted as a member of Third Church in the South End of Boston on the Common. He read the Bible daily, hosted prayer meetings in his home, served the music ministry, and baptized his own children. He was a bit of a self-righteous moralist who complained bitterly in the pages of his diary and in public of the decline of morality. Even the minister Cotton Mather advised him to be more tolerant of the faults of others.

Sewall was as faithful to serving the community as he was to serving his church. He served as the official printer of the colony, a representative in the Massachusetts General Court (the assembly for the colony), a captain of the militia, an overseer of Harvard, and a night watchman to enforce Boston’s curfew. In 1688, during the Glorious Revolution deposing James II, he even hazarded a trip across the Atlantic with Reverend Increase Mather. In London, they argued for a restoration of the Massachusetts charter since it had been revoked in 1684 with the creation of the Dominion of New England. After an unsuccessful trip, he returned to Boston in time for the outbreak of witchcraft in neighboring Salem in 1692.

The witchcraft cases were controversial before Sewall even accepted a position as one of the nine judges on the special court. In June, Governor Phips and Chief Justice Nathaniel Saltonstall expressed doubts about the use of spectral evidence, which was evidence of invisible spirits influencing human actions that was admitted to court in the trials because it was not commonly accepted in English law. Moreover, several ministers wrote a tract called “The Return of Several Ministers,” which also condemned the use of spectral evidence and complained about the injustices that were occurring. The greatest miscarriage of justice was many of the accused were being jailed – and would soon be condemned to death – for evidence that was invisible, and its existence could not be proven or disproven. Sewall was torn between his public duty and private doubts.

Nevertheless, the jails were jammed with suspected witches, and the executions continued in June, July, and August. He was present in July, when condemned Sarah Good screamed the chilling words at a minister: “I am no more a witch than you are a wizard. If you take my life away, God will give you blood to drink.” His conscience may have been even more troubled when he heard sermons from his minister that urged compassion for the accused because the Devil enjoyed spreading lies and causing dissension. He was deeply troubled and sought guidance from Reverend Increase Mather. Meanwhile, Chief Justice Saltonstall resigned from the court because of the
disgraceful transgressions of justice. However, the court still sentenced more than a dozen witches to be executed in August and September.

In October, the witchcraft trials 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. The ministers of Boston again railed against the trials. Reverend Increase Mather sermonized: “It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned.” Governor Phips disbanded the court and relieved Sewall of his burden. The Massachusetts General Court called for a “day of fasting and prayer” for divine guidance and reflection about the witchcraft outbreak and response. Samuel Sewall, for one, recoiled in horror at what he had done and was tormented for years by the guilt. Finally, five years later, he willingly accepted responsibility for his actions even though it was a humiliating experience for him.

On Thursday, January 14, 1697, Sewall entered his Third Church with the rest of the congregation 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 in shame while the minister read his public apology. Driven by guilt because he was so deeply involved in the 1692 witchcraft prosecutions, Sewall “desires to take the blame and shame of it, asking the pardon of men, and especially desiring prayers for God, who has an unlimited authority, would pardon that sin and all his other sins . . . [and] not visit the sin of him, or of any other, upon himself or any of his, nor upon the Land.” The public apology made and responsibility accepted, he bowed deeply to his fellow congregants and humbly sat down.

Judge Samuel Sewall had carried out an injustice in 1692, because of his role in trials that convicted and executed people based on hysteria, and he later accepted responsibility for his wrongs. He was the only judge from the special court to apologize publicly for the role he played in the witchcraft trials. It seems that the other eight judges on the court found it much easier to forget or rationalize the injustices of the Salem witch trials and move on with their lives. Instead, Sewall demonstrated character strength amidst adversity even though he had to humble himself before others and accept the terrible guilt of his participation in the shameful events.

Questions

1. Who was Samuel Sewall? What was Sewall’s role in the Salem Witch Trials? How did this role affect his identity during and after the trials?
2. Based on Sewall’s role at the trials, what was his purpose? Did he live up to that purpose?
3. What was Sewall’s purpose in his speech to the congregation? How did this change his identity?
Handout B: The Accused

Sample narrative: I am standing in a line in front of the crowded courtroom. I know I am not guilty of the charge of witchcraft, but I don’t know if any of the others in line are guilty. If I claim innocence, they will think I am lying. If I say I am guilty, I will surely be hung. I decide I have to act responsibly and tell the judges and the rest of the town that I am not guilty. I just have to hope that they will believe me.

Narrative 2:

Narrative 3:

Narrative 4:

Narrative 5:

Narrative 6:

Narrative 7:

Narrative 8:
Handout C: The Judges

Sample narrative: I am seated in front of the group of accused persons and many people of the town who are here to watch the trials. What evidence against a person accused will make me vote to convict him or her? What evidence will make me decide against conviction? What would I do if I convicted someone who was innocent or let someone go who was guilty? I would have to take responsibility for my actions whether I convict someone or not, even if I am wrong.

Narrative 2:

Narrative 3:

Narrative 4:

Narrative 5:

Narrative 6:

Narrative 7:

Narrative 8:
Sample narrative: You are with the rest of your family, neighbors, and members of your church in the crowded room waiting for the trial. Your aunt and uncle are part of the group that is accused of witchcraft. You have never seen them perform any spells, but you have also heard that witches can make you remember things incorrectly. Your aunt always did like that black cat that lived in the barn and many strange things have been happening lately. How do you react when they convict your aunt and uncle? What will you do if they are sentenced to hang? You decide, “I have to tell the judges about all of the strange things that go on at my aunt’s and uncle’s house—it’s my responsibility to protect my family and the rest of the town from the evils of witchcraft.”

Narrative 2:

Narrative 3:

Narrative 4:

Narrative 5:

Narrative 6:

Narrative 7:

Narrative 8:
Handout E: Acting Responsibly

1. How did Sewall perform regarding his duties at the trials? How did his initial performance affect his later performance?
2. How did Sewall’s purpose change from his role as judge to his role at the end of the narrative?
3. How did Sewall’s identity change from when he was a judge at the trials to when he stood before his congregation and took responsibility for his actions?
4. How did Sewall take responsibility for his actions? How did taking responsibility help him advance freedom for others?
5. How would you feel if you were Sewall standing in front of the congregation making the statement he made in 1697?
6. How does taking responsibility for your actions help others? How does it help to advance freedom for yourself and for others?
7. How did you react to Sewall’s role in the trials? Did he act responsibly in his role? Would you have done the same? If not, what would you have done differently?
8. Connect Sewall’s experience with something in your own life. What was your purpose in that situation?
9. Think about a time when you made a decision or took an action that you later found to be the wrong decision or action. How did you respond when you learned that this decision or action did not align with your identity or purpose?
10. How can acting responsibly help you determine your own identity? How does your identity help you act responsibly?
11. How does acting responsibly in your own life help protect the freedom of others? Why is it important to be responsible and free?
12. Sewall did not act responsibly at the beginning of the story, but he later took responsibility for his actions. How can you take responsibility for your own actions every day? Are there transgressions in your past that you can begin to make right today? If so, how will you put that process in motion?