

Standards Focus: Historical Context***Crime and Punishment in Puritan Society***

Because the American Puritan society was so new and fragile, certain social expectations were placed on all citizens. Any deviation from the newly established laws and codes was seen as a form of dissent against the community as well as the rules set forth by God. In the eyes of the magistrates who ruled the Puritan society, the tight-knit community they had created could not afford to let things get out of control.

Those who committed crimes or were seen as dissenters were punished severely and publicly. Punishments centered mostly on public humiliation and the idea of vengeance. Most punishments were settled with an “eye for an eye,” so if a person stole a loaf of bread, he might be branded with the letter *T* for “thief” on his hand. Most towns were required to have branding irons as a basic form of punishment. Persons who were not given the maximum punishment for their crime might be forced to stand in front of the community and confess their sins, or to wear a sign specifying their transgression, as seen in *The Scarlet Letter*.

One of the most popular forms of punishment was to be placed on the pillory, trapping the person in a large wooden stockade for a set number of hours. Often, the person would also have their ears nailed to the stockade while people threw food, trash, and anything they could get their hands on at the prisoner. But the Puritans also created far harsher punishments. A woman accused of being indecently dressed might be stripped down to her waist and whipped until her back dripped with blood. Others were dragged by their ankles all over town, pierced through the tongue, or maimed in some other way. For women who gossiped, the two most likely punishments were the ducking stool or the brank. The ducking stool was a chair attached at the end of two beams that could be extended over a river or pond so that the criminal could be dunked repeatedly into the water. The brank was a cage that fit over the head, holding the tongue by either clamping it or puncturing it so that the accused gossip could not speak.

There was only one way that a person could escape severe punishment—to declare “benefit of clergy,” which was originally started so that the clergymen might have an upper hand (since they were one of the few groups that could read). “Benefit of clergy” simply meant that the accused would have to read a passage from the Bible, with no mistakes, in front of the magistrates and congregation. However, because the Bible passage was almost always the same, people started to memorize the passage and hope that they knew it well enough to please the judges into reducing their sentence or pardoning them completely.

Far worse than the fear of any punishment, however, was the underlying fear that gripped the Puritans: the fear of the devil. Because the society was so fragile and small, citizens were vulnerable and felt that they needed to take serious actions in order to defend themselves and keep their society “on the straight and narrow.” Their survival rested heavily on the graciousness of God, and Puritans believed that anything that could not be explained or solved with their commonly used tools and cures was certainly the work of the devil. A sick child who could not be medically cured was said to have been seized by the devil. Dying crops were blamed on the devil. Unfortunate and circumstantial problems or issues were believed to be God’s punishment or the devil at work in their community. While some people tried to find other explanations and resolutions to problems that could not be easily explained, they were often accused of conspiring with the devil and ended up being accused and often convicted of witchcraft, which was punishable by death. In Salem, the hysteria and fear of the devil became so out of hand that the Salem Witch Trials ensued and resulted in the deaths of many innocent people.