

Standards Focus: Historical Context***Life as a Puritan***

Because Puritan life was interdependent, the most important thing a Puritan could do was to remember his or her role as a member of the community. Puritan society was strict and anyone that challenged the everyday norms or tried to think or act only for themselves or their own family could be subject to punishment. There was a social hierarchy that was strictly respected in every community.

Most of the people who came to America to settle in the colonies came as indentured servants, and these were the people who made up the majority of the society. They were to fulfill the term of their servitude before being set free to establish a home and life for themselves. Because there was no stigma of shame associated with indentured servitude, most had no problem building homes and joining a community after being freed of their service. The other part of the community was made up of free citizens, day laborers, and day farmers—the working class. They could voice their opinions, (in a non-threatening way, of course) and be active citizens of society. However, they would always have to keep in mind those who held a higher rank.

The upper class consisted of the rich, and their presence was palpable. They enjoyed political power and respect, and indulged in the fineries of beautiful clothes and other luxuries, while always staying within the boundaries of Puritan codes. Because these aristocrats were the people who made the laws and provided order, the middle and lower class citizens were careful to ignore an aristocrat's crime or transgression. In this way, the aristocrats and clerics were held above the law.

Despite this rigid social ladder, women still had no official status in the society. Despite being seen as spiritually equal to men in the eyes of Puritan religious standards, women were subordinate to men in every way, and were expected to bow their heads to their husbands and fathers. Women could not own property, unless they were widows who had not remarried, and they had to keep their arms and hair covered. Women were hard-working and strong despite the fact that they were mostly viewed as property belonging to their husbands and gossips that constantly caused trouble. The weaker sex in this male-dominated society, women were also thought to be more susceptible to the temptation of the devil. However, there were some times when women had some influence on the way society was run, especially when a group of women gathered to express their concerns to their influential husbands.

Social Hierarchy

Upper Class—judges, preachers, and the wealthy

Middle Class—gentlemen, free citizens, and day laborers

Lower Class—indentured servants and vagabonds