

The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson

Source: Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, 1682

“Upon a Friday, a little after noon, we came to this river. When all the company was come up, and were gathered together, I thought to count the number of them, but they were so many, and being somewhat in motion, it was beyond my skill. In this travel, because of my wound, I was somewhat favored in my load; I carried only my knitting work and two quarts of parched meal. Being very faint I asked my mistress to give me one spoonful of the meal, but she would not give me a taste. They quickly fell to cutting dry trees, to make rafts to carry them over the river: and soon my turn came to go over. By the advantage of some brush which they had laid upon the raft to sit upon, I did not wet my foot (which many of themselves at the other end were mid-leg deep) which cannot but be acknowledged as a favor of God to my weakened body, it being a very cold time. I was not before acquainted with such kind of doings or dangers. “When thou passeth through the waters I will be with thee, and through the rivers they shall not overflow thee” (Isaiah 43.2). A certain number of us got over the river that night, but it was the night after the Sabbath before all the company was got over. On the Saturday they boiled an old horse’s leg which they had got, and so we drank of the broth, as soon as they thought it was ready, and when it was almost all gone, they filled it up again.

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Commentary

- ① For most of her life, Mary Rowlandson identified herself using her formal married name. She was married to the Reverend Joseph Rowlandson, a prominent clergyman in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Although he died while Mary was in her early forties, she continued to use her married name until she remarried 10 years later. Ask students to think about how her identity as a Reverend’s wife informs how we read her narrative. What does her perspective change about the text?
- ② Although the text was written later in Mary Rowlandson’s life, it describes events that took place during King Philip’s War.
- ③ Mary was injured during the raid in Lancaster. Her youngest daughter, who had also sustained an injury, died a week after the attack.
- ④ Puritans had a complicated understanding of the connection between faith, bodies, and souls. They understood bodily suffering as both a punishment from God that demonstrated the frailty of the human condition and a blessing in that it allowed them to better understand the physical sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth.

You can continue the discussion by having students make connections between contemporary ideas about appropriate behavior (such as the censoring of nudity in films) and how Mary Rowlandson represents colonial bodies. Is she ashamed of her body? Is her body seen as a burden? Is the body seen as less than the mind?

⑤ Questions for discussion

Encourage your students to think about the role of Biblical passages in the narrative. They clearly fulfill an important role that speaks to both the purpose and the historical significance of the text.

Ask your students the following:

1. Why do you think Mary Rowlandson incorporated Biblical passages into her narrative? What role do they serve?
2. How could these passages contribute to her characterization?
3. What does the use of Biblical passages reveal about the historical context in which she was writing?

The first week of my being among them I hardly ate any thing; the second week I found my stomach grow very faint for want of something; and yet it was very hard to get down their filthy trash; but the third week, though I could think how formerly my stomach would turn against this or that, and I could starve and die before I could eat such things, yet they were sweet and savory to my taste. I was at this time knitting a pair of white cotton stockings for my mistress; and had not yet wrought upon a Sabbath day. When the Sabbath came they bade me go to work. I told them it was the Sabbath day, and desired them to let me rest, and told them I would do as much more tomorrow; to which they answered me they would break my face. And here I cannot but take notice of the strange providence of God in preserving the heathen. They were many hundreds, old and young, some sick, and some lame; many had papooses at their backs. The greatest number at this time with us were squaws, and they traveled with all they had, bag and baggage, and yet they got over this river aforesaid; and on Monday they set their wigwams on fire, and away they went. On that very day came the English army after them to this river, and saw the smoke of their wigwams, and yet this river put a stop to them. God did not give them courage or activity to go over after us. We were not ready for so great a mercy as victory and deliverance. If we had been God would have found out a way for the English to have passed this river, as well as for the Indians with their squaws and children, and all their luggage. ‘Oh that my people had hearkened to me, and Israel had walked in my ways, I should soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries’ (Psalm 81.13–14).”

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- ⑥ This is one of the most famous lines from Rowlandson’s text. Her characterization of their food changes dramatically from “filthy trash” to “sweet and savory.” Ask your students to think about the deeper significance of this shift. Why does it matter to the narrative? What does it suggest about Rowlandson’s understanding of Native American culture?
- ⑦ Keeping the Sabbath holy was considered incredibly important to Puritans. Any kind of work or revelry was expressly forbidden. When the Puritans outlawed the celebration of Christmas in 1659, they did so because they thought the raucous celebration of the holiday violated rules around the Sabbath.
- ⑧ Encourage your students to work through this line in either pairs or small groups. If Mary Rowlandson wants to be rescued (which she does), why does she say she was not ready for the mercy of “deliverance”? How does this line speak to Puritan cultural values?

Historical Situation:

Write or type your response in this area.

Check your response: *Did you use all the information in the caption to determine the historical circumstances of this text? What can you infer about the historical event depicted? Why does the date of this text matter?*

Audience:

Write or type your response in this area.

Check your response: *Who was the audience of this document? How do you know? What groups would be less receptive of this type of account? What groups would be more receptive? Why do these factors about audience matter?*

Point of View:

Write or type your response in this area.

Check your response: *This document clearly has a distinct point of view. What was it? Why would its point of view matter?*

Purpose:

Write or type your response in this area.

Check your response: *What was the purpose of this document? Why does the overall purpose matter?*

Y:

Write or type your response in this area.

Check your response: *This is the important part to earn this point. Did you explain, in detail, the significance of one of the answers above? Can you show a deeper level of analysis?*