Captivity Narratives

What are they?

Captivity narratives originated in the 17th century and are stories written about people who are taken by an indigenous population against their will. The captive is faced with challenges along the way because of their hatred of Indians and the opposing views they have against them. The individuals captured dislike the indigenous populations because the Puritan faith has already bestowed negative views about them into their minds. Captives can also symbolize the Puritan society being tested to see if they will stay pure or fall into the practices of the tribes. The Indians took people captive for reasons such as revenge for taking land, ransom to have the upper hand, and replacing populations lost in wars. The narratives were mostly nonfiction after individuals were captured and told their story.

Why were they made?

Captivity narratives were made for such reasons as religious expression tying to Puritan faith, being popular, westward expansion, and it reinforced stereotypes. The captivity narrative embodied the religious teachings of the colonists at the time and proved that through God, the captive could and would be saved. This is the reason they became popular, religion was tied into the narrative and Puritans wanted to rebuild their faith to strengthen Puritanism. Stereotypes found in them consisted of Indians being thought of as brutal beasts to the Spanish and the Indians representing satanic figures to the Puritans. There is a side to the captivity narratives that suggest the captives stay with the captors, but it would go against the church and left colonists in disbelief. In the 19th century, some of the captivity narratives reflected the idea that the Indians weren’t as bad as they were seen to be.

Patterns

There is a certain pattern in all captivity narratives. A captive is taken by a tribe and kept for a long period of time. He or she is then transformed through the experience to gain wisdom while undergoing mental and physical torture. The captive is released or he or she escapes and spreads the knowledge they obtained. There are some consistent themes represented in these narratives such as cannibalism, scalping, and adopting the captive. Myths can be thought about in captivity narratives such as when Pocahontas and John Smith fall in love in the woods.

Famous Captivity Narratives

The most famous captivity narrative is Mary Rowlandson’s “A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson.” In it, she is captured by an Indian tribe for 11 weeks and is a model example of what Puritan faith is. She trusts the word of God and believes that a person of God needs to remain a true Christian. She believes that a person must endure what God has given to him or her and take signs of God’s Grace. She says, “I have learned to look beyond present and smaller troubles, and to be quieted under them.” The small issues do not matter because she knows that God’s plan will take over and guide her. Indians are savages in her eyes, but she cannot say otherwise because it would be going against the Puritan faith. There is a chance that she believes Indians are not as beastly as they seem, but she cannot go against God’s Grace. Another famous captivity narrative is “A General History of Virginia” by John Smith. In this, he was captured by the Powhatan Indians for about a month. During that time, the leader of the tribe realized that Smith was the leader at Jamestown and wanted a relationship with the English. The narrative follows the path as getting captured, getting mentally harmed, learning along the way, and eventually being released with knowledge. This narrative is not mostly about religious faith, but for adventure and expanding the colonies. It helps with showing westward expansion is possible while dealing with the Indians.

Works Cited Page

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