

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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## Chapter 1: Mary White Rowlandson (1637?-1711)

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### Primary Work

*The sovereignty and goodness of God, together with the faithfulness of his promises displayed, being a narrative of the captivity and restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, commended by her, to all that desires to know the Lord's doings to, and dealings with her. ...*, 1682 (known as the Narrative).

*Narrative*. reprint of 1953 edition. Sandwich, MA: Chapman Billies, Inc. ISBN 0-939218-20-8.

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### Mary Rowlandson (1637?-1711): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Dawn McFarland

According to Richard VanDerBeets, author of the article "Mary Rowlandson," "Mary White Rowlandson holds a secure if modest place in Colonial American literary history as author of the first and deservedly best known New England Indian captivity narrative, except for the sixteenth-century Spanish accounts, the first account of captivity published in North America" (266). The written account of her captivity, entitled The Sovereignty of Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, made her "one of the first American best sellers with an estimated minimum sale of 1000 in 1682" (Derounian 239). Even though her narrative is the only work scholars have found that she produced, it has put her down in our countries history. Despite what Rowlandson contributed to America's history, her background information is lacking in certainty. Mary Rowlandson, born Mary White, in the year 1635, however "new evidence suggests that *circa* 1637 is more accurate," in England to John and Joan White. The Whites were early settlers of Lancaster, Massachusetts. Pending on the year Mary was born, she was either twenty or twenty-two when she married Reverend Joseph Rowlandson in the year 1656. Mary and Joseph bore four children; however, only two survived: Mary, January 15, 1657/8, who died January 20, 1660/ 1; Joseph, March 7, 1661/ 2; Mary (again), August 12,

1665; and Sarah, September 15, 1669, who died nine days after the family was captured (Greene 24). To David Greene, author of "New Light on Mary Rowlandson," "Mary Rowlandson's description of Sarah's death and of her unwillingness to leave her child's body is one of the most moving passages in Colonial literature" (24):

About two hours in the night, my sweet Babe like a Lambe departed this life, on Feb. 18, 1675. It being about six yeares and five months old. It was nine days from the first wounding, in this miserable condition, without any refreshing of one nature or other, except a little cold water. I cannot but take notice, how at another time I could not bear to be in the room where any dead person was, but now the case is changed; I must and could ly down by my dead Babe, side by side all the night after. (Rowlandson 20) The loss of her youngest child during her captivity did not weaken her drive to survive. To Rowlandson, the love of God kept her alive.

| [Top](#) | During King Philip's war, the frontier of Lancaster was attacked by a Wampanoag war party on February 10, 1676. On this fateful day, Mary and her three children were taken captive and during the raid, Mary and her youngest each sustained a wound, which caused the death of her child. After nearly three months in captivity, and about twenty removes, on May 2, 1676, Mary was finally released. A few weeks later her son Joseph and daughter Mary were released, and what was left of the Rowlandson family was finally reunited (Greene 24). Through the death of her two children, as well as two husbands, and surviving her captivity, Mary Rowlandson died at Wethersfield on January 5, 1710/ 1, in her early seventies (Greene 33). However, the year 1710/ 1 is debatable. Some scholars suggest 1678, while others, like Greene, suggest 1710/ 1. In contrast, accountability of her place in American history is not debated on. She is revered by most scholars as an important figure, whose narrative "maintained its popularity throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; in the twentieth century, anthologies routinely include it and critics consider it a Colonial classic" (Derounian 239). From the beginning of the publication, Rowlandson's Colonial classic has turned out about thirty editions, four, of which, were published in 1682 alone. In accordance to Kathryn Derounian, author of "The Publication, Promotion, and Distribution of Mary Rowlandson's Indian Captivity Narrative in the Seventeenth Century," "we do not know exactly where or when Mary Rowlandson wrote her narrative; however, external and internal evidence suggests she wrote it within several years of her release in May 1675" (240). Importance of the date as to when it was written is insignificant compared to the effects and statement that it has produced. To VanDerBeets "the significance of her captivity lies not so much on its unfolding tale of ordeal and fortitude as in its expression of profoundly felt religious experience" (266). VanDerBeets views the captivity as a moral lesson, which is derived from Rowlandson's use of scripture and constant reference to God's "wonderful power":

In the course of her narrative Rowlandson turns to the scriptures for comfort more than sixty-five times, as she reflects on a variety of incidents ranging from the death of her child . . . to her staying dry while fording a river. (VanDerBeets 266) So, through her use of scriptures and strength in God, VanDerBeets claims that "the experience of Indian captivity is viewed as salutary and morally instructive" (267).

Agreeing with VanDerBeet's point that the narrative is a spiritual one, Michelle Burnham, author of "The Journey Between: Liminality and Dialogism in Mary White Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative," explains that Rowlandson's journey is

a type of spiritual pilgrimage which this good Puritan unwittingly but dutifully undergoes, an experience of affliction and conversion designed to tempt the captive and to test her sanctity and election. (60)

Burnham, however, sees deeper into Rowlandson's captivity and sees aspects of adaptation that was forced upon her while in captivity. When Burnham states,

as a captive, Mary Rowlandson occupies a hinge that divides one cultural subjectivity from another, for during her captivity she belongs wholly neither to the Puritan nor to the Indian cultural system

he is expressing his belief that Mary, unknowingly, adapted herself to part of the Indian culture (64). In doing so, she loses a sense of her Puritan self. For example, the conflict Rowlandson undergoes during captivity is pointed out in the narrative when she sometimes refers to herself and the Indians as "we," which Burnham would point out by her "inconsistent use of pronouns" (66). The first time Rowlandson uses "we" is during the seventh Remove when she

says, "after a restless and hungry night there we had a wearisome time of it the next day." Yet, when the Indians are doing something that her Puritan culture deems barbaric she separates herself from the Indians, which can be seen when she describes what happened when the group came upon a deserted English place. Instead of saying "we" took " what we could" she "[objectifies] the Indians who [took] what they could," even though she admits that she took something, as well (Burnham 66). Throughout the rest of the narrative, Rowlandson is constantly in conflict with the pronoun usage; identifying herself with the Indians one minute, then when they do something against her Puritan culture, objectifying them. It is only when she is reunited with her family and back into the practice of her religion that she becomes admitted back into the Puritan culture, with more insight into another. Burnham notes that "by the time she writes her narrative, the challenge posed to her Puritan discourse by that of the Indian culture has passed, and her Puritan worldview . . . has been relatively restored," ending her struggle (67). Besides Rowlandson's narrative being looked at through a religious and cultural aspect, scholars do "work in such areas as history, genre studies, typology and bibliography" (Derounian 239). Like VanDerBeets and Burnham, Derounian has strayed from these studies and focuses on "manuscript transmission, seventeenth century editions, the Anglo-American book trade, book promotion, and contemporary readership" (239). Regardless of what types of studies have been done, Rowlandson's narrative has provided detailed knowledge as to what the experience was like as a captive. Through Rowlandson's work, generation after generation can look into the past and experience how it felt to be held captive by Indians.

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## Study Questions

1. How does the Narrative demonstrate Puritan theology and thinking at work?
2. In what ways does Rowlandson use her experience to reaffirm Puritan beliefs? How does she view herself and her fellow Christians? How does she see the Indians? What do her dehumanizing descriptions of the Indians accomplish?
3. Are there any instances where she seems to waver in her faith?
4. Why does Rowlandson distrust the "praying Indians"?
5. How does she use the Bible and varied scriptural allusions in her analysis of her captivity and restoration?
6. Does her world view change at all during her eleven weeks of captivity? Why or why not?

## MLA Style Citation of this Web Page

Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 1: Mary Rowlandson." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*. WWW URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap1/rowlandson.html> (provide page date or your date of logon).