

1. Read the first sentence of the text.

a. Where and when is the scene set?

The location is Boston. The text was published in 1850 and the narrator writes that the scene is set 'not less than two centuries ago' (my emphasis), so that 1650 is the latest possible date.

Since the Puritans arrived in North America in 1620, and founded Boston in 1630, the earliest possible date is 1620.

Therefore the scene is set in Boston between 1630 and 1650, that is to say in the early years of the Puritan theocracy.

b. What can be inferred about the situation?

The narrator describes a crowd of Puritans who have gathered outside Boston's prison and are looking at its door.

They have evidently come here because they know an event is scheduled and they want to see it.

c. What is the reader led to expect?

The reader is led to expect that a prisoner will be taken out of the prison and punished in public.

d. What is the effect of the phrase 'with their eyes intently fastened on the iron-clamped oaken door'?

This metaphor suggests that the doors of the prison are kept shut not just by its iron clamps but also by people's look. It suggests the collective gaze of society is a sort of prison.

2. Read the second sentence of the text.

What image does it give of the Puritans?

The ominous appearance of the Puritans, who are described as 'grim[ly] [rigid]', even 'petrified', stresses their austerity.

However, the narrator implies that, in this early phase of the New England theocracy, Puritan justice was not yet as cruel as it became later: he writes that 'at a later period' their appearance 'would have augured some awful business', which means it is not the case here.

3. Read the end of the paragraph.

a. What is meant by 'it might be'?

'It might be' means that the narrator is mentioning possibilities without saying if one of them, if any, is the actual case.

The narrator therefore pretends to be in the position of the reader, who has to interpret the scene based on the information the narrator has imparted to them and on what they know or imagine about the New England Puritan theocracy.

b. Does the list contain specific information about the situation? What purpose does it serve?

Because all the examples in the list are modalised¹ by the auxiliary 'might', none of them contains any factual information about what sort of criminal is going to be taken out of the prison.

Although the crimes and the punishments mentioned in this list are probably not related to the plot, the reader reads this list, and therefore imagines these punishments. These ideas and images in the reader's mind influence the way they

¹ Modalisation is the expression of a commentary by the speaker or writer, for example through a modal auxiliary, or through an adverb ('perhaps', 'surely' ...), an adjective ('possible', 'likely' ...), etc.

perceive the narrative.

The first two examples, those of a lazy slave and of a disobedient child, are bound to be perceived by the reader as instances of excessive severity, even injustice and cruelty. The first example may also serve as a reminder of New England's past: in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the text was published, the United States was deeply divided over slavery, and Massachusetts was among the northern states which opposed it and disapproved of slave states. This passage reminds the reader that Massachusetts has a darker past than it likes to admit.

Next, the reader is reminded of the well-known religious intolerance of the Puritans. They are also reminded of a paradox concerning the Puritans, who were originally English heretics who left England so as to be free to practise their religion, and who ruthlessly fought heresy once they governed England. Finally, the reader is reminded of the well-known splinterism² which plagued New England Puritans.

The next example is phrased in a way that identifies the Puritans as the creators of the crime which they punish: a native is punished for breaking the peace because he was drunk, which would never have happened if Europeans had not introduced alcohol ('the white man's firewater') in America. This circularity (producing a crime and then punishing it) echoes an implication of the example of the slave: a slave can be punished for being unproductive only if his or her work legally belongs to someone else, in other words if slavery is legal.

Finally, the last item of the list reminds the reader of the famous Salem witch trials, making them see the Puritans as superstitious and so severe as to be cruel. Additionally, witch trials are reminiscent of the Middle Ages, so that the Puritans appear archaic, moving back to a benighted³ past although their very project was to perfect the Protestant Reformation, that is to say to break away from the Middle Ages, the period when the Roman Catholic church reigned supreme over Christianity.

On the whole, this list also shows that Puritan justice tends to particularly punish people who have little or no power: slaves, children, native Americans, women. The only example of a free white adult male being punished is that of the heretic.

All in all, this passage activates the black legend of New England Puritan theocracy in the reader's mind.

4. Read the first two sentences of paragraph 2.

a. What happens? What new character appears?

The prison's door opens and the town-beadle walks out of it.

b. What is the function of the sword and the staff of office?

They signal the beadle's function ('staff of office', emphasis mine) and the specific role he is now playing: a judicial one (the sword symbolises justice).

c. What is the effect of the words 'prefigured and represented'?

These words present the beadle not as a character with an individual personality, but as a representative, a symbol (of his official role, of the law, of the social institution of which he is an instrument).

5. Read the following sentence.

a. What happens? What new character appears?

The beadle takes a young woman out of the jail. She frees herself from him as he

² Splinterism: a tendency for a group to divide (= to splinter) into different groups.

³ Benighted: *enténébré*

makes her walk out.

b. What do you understand about her? How do you understand it?

First, the reader understands that she is the prisoner whose punishment everyone is expecting. This is indicated visually, by the situation and by the beadle's actions (he draws her out of the prison).

Secondly, the reader understands her feelings and her choices, through her behaviour: when she is visible to the crowd, the reader understands that she refuses to be humiliated by being physically led, because she repels the beadle.

6. Read the last sentence of the paragraph.

What do you learn? What is implied by the new information?

The woman carries a young child who is seeing the daylight for the first time.

This implies that the child was born in prison, and therefore that the woman was pregnant when she was jailed.