

Branding, labeling, and public humiliation essay sample



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Throughout history, people have been labeled, branded, and tortured as a form of punishment and public humiliation. Humiliating the person who committed a crime was meant to serve as a warning and to scare people away from committing the same crime. Petty crimes that happen commonly today received the worst punishment back when the branding and labeling of criminals was popular. The punishment criminals received was often cruel and torturous. Early Puritan villages had a strict law and anyone who refused to follow was punished accordingly. (“ Colonial...” 1) If a person was caught stealing, “‘T’ for thief was branded on the light-fingered criminal’s hand.” The Puritan law revolved greatly around religion and it was often that people were punished for some crime against religion.

“ In the early seventeenth century, Boston’s Roger Scott was picked up for ‘ repeated sleeping on the Lord’s Day’ and sentenced to be severely whipped for ‘ striking the person who waked him from his godless slumber.’” (2) Even children were the victim of such ridiculous charges, such as “ Abiel Wood of Plymouth who was hauled before the court for ‘ irreverently behaving himself by chalking the back of one Hezekiah Purrington, Jr., with Chalk, playing and recreating himself in the time of publick worship.’” (2) People were even punished for committing “ sodomy” or homosexual behavior. “ Edward Preston was sentenced to be publicly whipped at both Plymouth and Barnstable ‘ for his lewd practices tending to sodomy with Edward Mitchell...’” (2)

In England, prostitution was widely punished with branding, labels, and even public whipping. (“ Punishing...” 1) The women who were selling their bodies were labeled as “ Winchester Geese”. The men who employed prostitutes

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were even punished by "...branding them on the face." (1) The prostitutes themselves were also punished. The " Branding Act" passed in 1623 said that " any woman convicted on taking goods valued at more than twelvecence would suffer in addition to a whipping or other punishment the branding of a T with a hot burning iron on her left thumb." (2) Branding was usually done immediately after the sentence so the woman could not bribe the punisher into using a less hot iron. When prostitution was legal, the women were still being labeled. They were not allowed to wear aprons, because an apron was the mark of a respectable woman. (2) After it was outlawed, multiple punishments could be given to prostitutes. Some had to shave their hair, have their ears clipped, or have their nose slit open. (2)

In Medieval times, torture, punishment, and labeling were aplenty. The Anglo-Saxons were the first to brand as a punishment. (" Burning..." 1) In an army, a deserter might be branded with the letter D. (2) Some of the common letters used to brand criminals were B for Blasphemy, F for Fray maker, M for Manslaughter, P for Perjurer, R for Rogue, S for Slave, SL for Seditious Libeler, SS for Sower of Sedition, and T for Thief. In France, " Not only did some French criminals have letters burned in them, but numbers as well. These, one inch high, identified the department (district) in which the convict was imprisoned, and were burned in beneath and slightly to the left of the letter or letters." (2) The Brazen Bull was a device made for public torture. " Imagine a full-sized replica of a bull, made of brass, with a trap-door in its back to allow access to its hollow interior. The victim would be locked inside it, and a fire then lighted beneath the belly of the ' beast'... For

the reeds he had installed in the bull's nostrils would convert the screams of the tormented into a musically pleasing lowing sound."

In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the main character Hester Prynne is labeled after she commits adultery. She has to wear a red letter A that stands for Adultery on the bosom of her gown. "On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold-tread, appeared the letter A." (Hawthorne... 40) Through the story, people treat her differently because of how she is labeled. "Clergymen paused in the streets to address words of exhortation, that brought a crowd, with its mingled grin and frown, around the poor, sinful woman. If she entered a church, trusting to share the Sabbath smile of the Universal Father, it was often her mishap to find herself the text of the discourse." (64)

Hester doesn't even feel comfortable meeting eyes with strangers in public because she is so humiliated about the scarlet letter. "Another peculiar torture was felt in the gaze of a new eye. When strangers looked curiously at the scarlet letter, -and none ever failed to do so, - they branded it afresh into Hester's soul; so that oftentimes, she could scarcely refrain, yet always didn't refrain, from covering the symbol with her hand." (65) Labeling has been used as a form of punishment for centuries. Branding was used to torture and to punish as well as to encourage the public to be sin free. Public humiliation was used so the criminal was too embarrassed to commit another crime out of fear of being humiliated again. People really were punished in weird ways back then.

Works Cited

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