



## **Pillars of Salt: An Anthology of Early American Criminal Narratives**

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# Pillars of Salt: An Anthology of Early American Criminal Narratives

## **Pillars of Salt: An Anthology of Early American Criminal Narratives**

Designed first to terrify readers with examples of divine retribution against lives gone wrong, and later to excite prurient imaginations, criminal narratives comprise a significant but forgotten genre of American literature. The representation of crime and the characterization of criminals in these narratives, according to Williams, offer an accurate index of more widespread social transformations, such as the secularization of society and the growth of capitalism. Recorded first by Puritan clergy as morality plays, these narratives depict the ritual drama of execution, in which the condemned criminals were given specific roles to fulfill, roles that not only marked the boundaries of acceptable behavior but also made crime understandable. For New Englanders of later generations, however, the scaffold was a stage for a more secular drama, and the popular narratives it produced served a very different purpose. Profit replaced passion as a motive for crime, and condemned criminals were used to demonstrate the pathetic consequences of ungoverned greed. By collecting and presenting thirty-two examples of crime stories ranging from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries, Williams explores the public ritual of capital punishment and the changing aspects of the genre it produced. These tales are as fascinating today as they were two and a half centuries ago, and they offer a glimpse of how popular literature functioned in early American society.

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