

Samuel Bradshaw - Period 1

AP Language and Composition

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Anne Bradstreet was the only real American poet of her time, and a talented writer. As such, her works are historically significant. She was born in England, but traveled at the age of 16 to the Puritan settlements in the Massachusetts Bay colonies, in British America (Hart 94). This is where she developed her unique writing talent; she was isolated from England, where traditional forms of poetry were flourishing (Magill 393). Her family, religion, and several other poets contributed significantly to the content and skill of her poetry. Bradstreet's poems are a direct expression of the events and circumstances of her life, and are influenced substantially by her familial, religious, and moral beliefs and experiences; these things, and also several English poets she read, shaped her poems.

Anne Bradstreet's family was mentioned several times in her poems. In fact, most of her poems are about her family. Several of these poems are epitaphs, such as this one written for her mother, "A worthy matron of unspotted life,/ A loving mother and obedient wife,/ A friendly neighbor, pitiful to poor,/ Whom oft she fed, and clothed with her store;" (Woodlief) The following is taken from Bradstreet's epitaph of her father, Thomas Dudley:

Within this tomb a patriot lies/ That was both pious, just and wise,/ To truth a shield, to right a wall,/ To sectaries a whip and maul,/ A magazine of history,/ A prizer of good company/ In manners pleasant and severe/ The good him loved, the

bad did fear,/ And when his time with years was spent/ In some rejoiced, more did
lament./ 1653, age 77. (Woodlief)

Such poetic tributes prove that Bradstreet admired and appreciated her parents. Bradstreet also wrote poetic epitaphs for two of her grandchildren, Elizabeth and Simon Bradstreet, who died at an early age. Not all of her family-oriented poems were epitaphs, however. Bradstreet also wrote several letters in the form of poems – to her father, her husband (Simon Bradstreet), and her children. “To Her Father with Some Verses”, “A Letter to her Husband, absent upon Publick employment”, and “In Reference to her Children, 23 June 1659” are just a few of the many poem-letters she wrote (“Anne Bradstreet”). In the latter poem suggested above, Bradstreet speaks of her children as birds, some “flown away”:

I had eight birds hatcht in one nest,/ Four Cocks were there, and Hens the rest./ I
nurst them up with pain and care,/ No cost nor labour did I spare/ Till at the last
they felt their wing,/ Mounted the Trees and learned to sing. (McElrath)

This quote means that Bradstreet had 8 children (“birds”), four boys (“cocks”) and four girls (“hens”). She speaks of how she nurtured and taught them, until they learned to fend for themselves (“felt their wing ... and learned to sing”). “To Her Father with Some Verses” begins with the following lines: “Most truly honoured, and as truly dear,/ If worth in me or ought I do appear,/ Who can of right better demand the same/ Than may your worthy self from whom it came?” The letter to her husband Simon, “A Letter to her Husband, absent upon Publick employment,” starts: “My head, my heart, mine eyes, my life, nay more,/ My joy, my magazine, of earthly store,/ If two be one, as surely thou and I,/ How stayest thou there, whilst I at Ipswich lie?” Through these poems we can gain a

sense of the great love she felt for her family. She praises them and speaks of them in high terms. It is evident that this shows through in her poems.

The second major influence on her writing seems to be her Puritan beliefs. The Puritans were members of the Congregational Church, a morally and religiously strict church that defined a way of life (Kennedy 50-51). The strict attitude they had is the origin of the phrase many use today, “Puritan work ethic,” which denotes a strong belief that work is more important than other things, and is often used when somebody continues working on a project despite setbacks. Work is not a complete representation of the Puritan faith, however – their religion was based on a belief that the Bible was the supreme authority on earth, and that personal salvation depends only upon the grace of God (Applebee 148).

Anne Bradstreet has written numerous poems on religious topics: “By Night When Others Soundly Slept” speaks of prayer: “I sought him whom my Soul did Love,/ With tears I sought him earnestly./ He bow'd his ear down from Above./ In vain I did not seek or cry”; “Deliverance from a Fit of Fainting” expresses gratitude to God: “My feeble spirit Thou didst revive,/ My doubting Thou didst chide,/ And though as dead mad'st me alive,/ I here a while might 'bide”, and there are several poems entitled “Meditation” on various topics (“Anne Bradstreet”). When Bradstreet wasn’t writing specifically about religion, her religion often still peeked through – such as in her poem “Upon the Burning of Our House”, wherein she recounts this disaster in her life. She chides herself for having been upset about her burnt-down house, alluding to the story in the Old Testament of Job, who was afflicted with all sorts of trials yet remained steadfast and without

complaint. Then she praises God for the promises in the Bible of a mansion and treasure on high for the faithful:

Thou hast an house on high erect/ Fram'd by that mighty Architect,/ With glory
richly furnished,/ Stands permanent tho' this bee fled./ It's purchased, and paid for
too/ By him who hath enough to doe./ A Prize so vast as is unknown,/ Yet, by his
Gift, is made thine own./ Ther's wealth enough, I need no more;/ Farewell my
Pelf, farewell my Store./ The world no longer let me Love,/ My hope and
Treasure lyes Above. (Applebee 150-151)

From those poems above mentioned we can infer that her religious Puritan beliefs deeply affected her poetry.

A third contributing factor to the success of Bradstreet's poems was the high esteem she had for other poets, to several of whom she gave recognition and emulated in her poems. Bradstreet was born to a family in which literature was very important. Her father was also a poet. Unfortunately, he had little time for poetry since his arrival in the Americas – he was a governor in the Massachusetts Bay Colonies (Magill 393).

Bradstreet was left to reading and learning from European poetry. But her father did provide her with a good education, through private tutors (Lombardi). The only other substantial poet in America during her lifetime was Sir Walter Raleigh, who stayed there only for a short time.

Fortunately for Bradstreet, England was in a kind of “Golden Age” of poetry. There were many great poets to learn and choose from. Traces in her poems point out that Bradstreet was probably familiar with the poetry composed by such famous British writers as Shakespeare, Cervantes, Sir Philip Sidney, and several others (Lombardi).

Interestingly enough, Sir Philip Sidney was a distant relative to Bradstreet, an English aristocrat (Magill). A few lines from one of her poems, “An Elegie upon that Honourable and renowned Knight Sir Philip Sidney” show that she admired Sidney’s poems: “How to persist, my muse is more in doubt;/ Which makes me now with Sylvester confess,/ But Sidney’s Muse can sing his worthiness.” (Schenk 5:13) In this quote she confessed her works to be less skillful than his. Her opinions were high of many of the English poets she read from. As a consequence of the booming age of poetry in England, her poems came to be known somewhat in England. She was held to the high “bookish and generalized” (Magill 393) standards, and did pretty well at the beginning – but as time went on, her poems conformed less and less to those standards and became more personal in nature – and, consequently, easier and more interesting for the average person to read.

All of these factors – her family, religion, and other poets she admired – contributed significantly to the content and skill of Bradstreet’s poetry. They are, in fact, the very substance of her poems; almost every one of her poems deals with one of these subjects. Thus we conclude that the circumstances of her life did indeed have an unalterable and significant impact upon her poetic works.

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