



Series 1, Number 7

ANNE BRADSTREET

1612-1672

BY NIGHT WHEN OTHERS SOUNDLY SLEPT

By night when others soundly slept
And hath at once both ease and Rest,
My waking eyes were open kept
And so to lie I found it best.

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.

My hungry Soul he fill'd with Good;
He in his Bottle put my tears,
My smarting wounds washt in his blood,
And banisht thence my Doubts and fears.

What to my Saviour shall I give
Who freely hath done this for me?
I'll serve him here whilst I shall live
And Loue him to Eternity.

PODCAST (<https://influential> lyrics, etc.).

Topics & Terms

- Women poets
- American poetry
- Puritan poetry

Lines to remember...

What to my Saviour shall I give
Who freely hath done this for me?
I'll serve him here whilst I shall live
And Loue him to Eternity.

Podcast Script

Anne Bradstreet, “By Night when Others Soundly Slept”

The year 1650 saw the publication in England of a volume of poetry called *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*. This was the first volume of poetry published by a full time resident of the new world, and—remarkably enough—it was by a woman writer: Anne Bradstreet. Bradstreet’s biography, as we’ll see, is extraordinary. Anne Dudley was born in 1612 to a prosperous Puritan family, and, thanks to her father’s position as the steward of a noble estate, she received a solid education and had access to a good library. At about the age of 16, Anne married Simon Bradstreet, one of her father’s assistants. This was, however, a time of great strife between the Puritans—like the Dudleys and the Bradstreets—and the politically dominant Church of England. The tension became increasingly intense in the later 1620s, and in 1629 the whole Dudley/Bradstreet family, together with some 300 other Puritans, made the daring voyage to America to establish a new colony in Massachusetts. Life was extremely difficult for these pioneer/settlers, and many starved during the first winter. But despite these hardships, religion remained at the center of the Puritan community, and it was clearly a profound influence on Bradstreet’s life and poetry.

For the present podcast, I've selected a late lyric poem called "By Night when Others Soundly Slept." This is a seemingly uncomplicated, but intensely religious poem in which the speaker, while lying awake at night, is comforted by a visitation from her Saviour, presumably Jesus, and she rededicates herself to the service of her religion. The poem itself is easy enough to understand, though when seen in the context of Bradstreet's life, we can begin to see why she was such a remarkable and influential writer. So here is Anne Bradstreet's "By Night when Others Soundly Slept."

[poem]

So there you have it—a simple poem describing an intense but ultimately comforting religious experience. In one sense, as we'll see in a moment, the very simplicity of the poem is the point. First, though, let's give the poem a quick explication.

The opening stanza finds the speaker lying awake at night "while others soundly slept." It seems a familiar enough situation, but an awareness of Bradstreet's circumstances might make the image a bit more tangible. As the daughter of one of the most prominent men in the community—and the wife of another—Bradstreet had to meet some heavy expectations. She was responsible for managing the home: everything from seeing to it that the house and gardens were kept in good order, that enough food was being properly stored for the coming winter, that her children were well taken care of, that everyone in the house (family and servants alike) were properly conducting a rigorous and disciplined spiritual life, and so on. And much of this burden she had to take on herself as Simon was frequently away from the home tending to the business of the growing Puritan community. Often, the only time for reflection (or for writing poetry) would have been after her housemates had gone to bed. And note, too, that, to a modern reader, "gone to bed" likely suggests a comfortable moment of tranquility and privacy. But the Bradstreet house was quite small—just a couple of rooms—and everyone would bed down in the same space to be near the fireplace. One can easily see why Bradstreet would take some comfort in the "ease and Rest" of her housemates AND why she might cherish a moment when her "waking eyes were open kept."

The middle two stanzas of Bradstreet's poem narrate what the speaker takes as a divine visitation. Initially, she is longing for some spiritual reassurance. She "sought him whom [her] soul did love" and this earnest desire is immediately answered when "He bow'd his ear down from Above." The speaker's sense of a divine presence proves cathartic: in that moment her "hungry soul"—with all its tears and fears, "smarting wounds" and doubts—is wholly comforted and reassured. The result, then, is that the speaker's faith is confirmed, and she ends the poem with a re-dedication to her earthly service and a more confident claim of eternal life. "I'll serve him here whilst I shall live / And Loue him to Eternity."

So the basic narrative of the poem is quite straightforward--there aren't any tricky metaphors or elaborate conceits to explain and very little in the way of imagery or diction that seems obscure.

Bradstreet herself recognized that there was nothing especially noteworthy about the lyric. As she put it,

This was written in much sickness and weakness, and is very weakly and imperfectly done; but if you can pick any benefit out of it, it is the mark which I aimed at. (*The Poems of Mrs. Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton, p. 320)

Okay, so given that the poet herself was rather dismissive of the poem, you might be wondering why I've selected it as an "Influential Lyric"! 'Legitimate question, but as I see it, the very simplicity of the poem, as I mentioned earlier, is itself revealing. For one thing, in contrast to the common representation of these early American settlers as unflinchingly dedicated to their religious faith, the poem finds the speaker beset with "doubts" and "fears." This is hardly surprising. The 17-year-old Anne Dudley Bradstreet who boarded a ship for America had grown up in relative comfort and security in an English country estate called Sempringham, in Lincolnshire. Though she didn't let on at the time, she later wrote that she had not wanted to trade this English life for the extreme deprivations the Puritans faced as they struggled to survive in the wilds of America. Adding to this tension was a central paradox at the heart of Puritan theology. On the one hand, the Puritans largely accepted the Calvinist doctrine that one's eternal salvation was predetermined by God, irrespective of the sort of earthly life one leads. On the other hand, one should always strive to live a pure, disciplined, holy life. Any sort of earthly success or hardship could be interpreted as a sign of one's divine favor or disfavor. For 21st-century readers it may be difficult to imagine the sort of psycho-spiritual struggles such a belief might engender. After all, Bradstreet is writing well before the 18th-century Enlightenment and even further before Darwin and an evolutionary understanding of the natural world. There simply was no competing narrative with which to explain the uncertainties of life. As a result, any setback—a bad harvest, a bout of illness, a house fire, whatever—could be seen not as the chance effects of bad weather but as divine disfavor. No wonder a Puritan woman could be troubled by fears and doubts and "smarting wounds" and be seeking after some reassurance!

What's more revealing, the reassurance the speaker receives in the poem is indicative of Bradstreet's Puritan faith. To understand this, it will help to highlight a couple of the many rifts between the Puritans and the Church of England (i.e., the Anglican Church) that initially prompted the Puritan exodus. First, from the Puritan point of view, the Anglican Church emphasized too heavily the ritual and music and artwork of the church itself. All this elaborate decoration and these expensive priestly robes—not to mention the whole ecclesiastical hierarchy—were essentially a distraction from the focus on preaching and Bible reading and on the meditation of one's individual relationship to the divine that the Puritans saw as central to their religious practice. The Anglican Church clung too closely to what the Puritans saw as a corrupt Catholic church that had supposedly been superseded by the Protestant Reformation a hundred years earlier. Second, the Anglican Church was too closely intertwined with the English institutions of social, political, and economic power and was often forced

to serve the worldly demands of the state rather than the spiritual demands as revealed in the Bible. It was (and is), after all, the Church of England, and as such, the Anglican church hierarchy simply could not avoid the corruption that comes with worldly power. (This is also, by the way, why the Puritans sought to build a “New England” on the blank slate of the American wilderness. Despite their exodus to America they still saw themselves as English subjects, they were intensely interested in news from the old country, and they felt that they were trying to establish a New England as a model that might rescue the old England from its corrupt religion. Hence, we still refer to this region of America “New England”.)

This brief history lesson offers a useful context for understanding Bradstreet’s poem. Yes, the basic narrative of the poem is simple—but note that it tells the story of an *individual* person who has a moving, comforting, and *individual* religious vision. There is no intermediary institution—no snazzy church, no prescribed religious ritual, no priest involved. From the Puritan perspective, this is the mark of a genuine, authentic, “pure” religion, and Bradstreet’s poem expresses this unadorned purity in the uncomplicated ballad stanza form, the plainly narrated late-night vision, and the dedication to service and love in the closing lines. It is precisely this forthright simplicity that, to me at any rate, makes this poem a good example of an emergent—and distinctly American—form of poetry. Like the Puritans who rejected the practices of the Anglican Church, this poem deliberately avoids both the witty figurative language and the classical literary allusions of the mainstream “literary” poetry in favor of a sincere and authentic personal narrative.

The simplicity of the poem actually creates something of a problem for a literary critic like me—I feel a little silly having produced such a long podcast about such a transparent, easy-to-understand poem. So let me conclude by thanking you for listening and by encouraging you to explore Bradstreet’s life and poetry more fully. I’ve provided some links and bibliography in the show notes and the website—it’s fascinating material not only because Bradstreet herself is such a remarkable person, but also because a study of her writing reveals so much about the social, religious, and political tensions that pertained in the American colonies in that persist in America to this day.

Thanks for listening! I’ll be happy to address any questions or suggestions you care leave in the comments, and as always, I’ll append another reading of the poem after the closing music. See you next time here on *Influential Lyrics*!

[poem]

FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

“Anne Bradstreet.” The Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-bradstreet>. Good introductory biography and overview of Bradstreet’s work.

Beebe, Ann. *Anne Bradstreet in Context: The Life and Work of a Colonial American Poet*. McFarland, 2025. Very readable biography with much historical and contextual information.

Bradstreet, Anne. *The Complete Works of Anne Bradstreet*, edited by Allan P. Robb and Joseph R. McElrath. Twayne Publishers, 1981. Standard collection of Bradstreet’s work.

MacLauchlin, Cory. “Anne Bradstreet.” YouTube, 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d68HU0OMTHw>>. An excellent brief introduction to Bradstreet.

ETC....

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