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## ANNE BRADSTREET'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS LOSS

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### ABSTRACT

Anne Bradstreet's poems about loss illustrate a dogmatic and conflicting attitude between belief and non-belief. The poet's anxiety emerges from the tension between the earthly and heavenly values. However, the perpetual dilemma about death remains open for all individuals.

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It is no surprise that the colonists were constantly struck by death, no matter the age, considering the precarious condition of life during the colonial days. The women generally died of childbirth and the children did not live much longer either. As Josephine Piercy (1965:92) points out, death was a frequent visitor to the young in colonial days and certainly the Bradstreets were not forgotten. Surprising is the fact that the fragile Anne Bradstreet lived long enough to record the deaths of so many of her loved ones.<sup>1</sup>

This study aims at demonstrating Anne Bradstreet's tension between the earthly and heavenly world. Some poems which best illustrate the poet's attachment to the temporal life and her awareness of the eternal one have been selected<sup>2</sup>. To accomplish this goal, these poems are placed in an order which reflects her attitude towards loss. Moreover, the ages of Bradstreet's deceased ones have been taken into account since they are significant to demonstrate her reaction in face of death.

According to Josephine Piercy (1965:26), Anne Bradstreet was a woman able to tell her children in retrospect *how her heart rose against her new circumstances and how she sometimes questioned the truth of spiritual matters accepted by her religious sect*<sup>3</sup>. Her poems show her

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dogmatic attitude and conflict between belief and non-belief which emerges from the tension between worldly and heavenly attainments. Anne Bradstreet's attachment to earthly things, both physical and material, brings doubt and tension between temporal and eternal values. The reader hears a painful voice trying to reconcile the material and spiritual world and most of the time feels that the author does not present a definite resolution but a voice of resignation sounds in the poems. One perceives how much she loved and cared for the earthly life, for temporal values such as friendship, health, and material belongings. Yet, she was always aware of the eternal values which she tried to accept as more important than the temporal ones. But many times she only succeeded in repeating the sentiments she knew a Christian should feel.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Anne Bradstreet's subtlety has enabled her to express her doubts and conflicts without putting in danger her position and the positions of the ones who supported her. She was not considered a heretic or a woman interfering with man's affairs as had happened with some of her female contemporaries<sup>5</sup>.

Anne Bradstreet wrote an Epitaph on her mother, *Mrs. Dorothy Dudley, who died on December 1643, at the age of 61*. Anne Bradstreet's attitude towards death in this poem is that of acceptance and her words are of praise to a woman who had dedicated her life to her family. She mentions her mother's pure life and her humane, domestic and religious qualities. There is no complaint in Anne Bradstreet's voice in this poem. Death at 61 seemed to her a normal happening. She only finds words to highlight her mother's dedicated domestic life which fulfilled the Puritan's expectations of a good woman's behavior. Besides, her life had been an exemplar of religious faith as she had made of her earthly days a preparation for eternal life. In this way, Anne Bradstreet does not offer anything more than the conventionally expected from an epitaph. The poem begins with a praise that goes on throughout all lines.<sup>6</sup>

Here lyes,  
A Worthy Matron of unspotted life,  
A loving Mother and obedient wife,  
A friendly Neighbor, pitiful to poor,  
(l. 1-4)

A true Instructor of her Family,  
(l. 7)

Religious in all her words and wayes,

Preparing still for death, till end of dayes:  
Of all her Children, Children, liv'd to see,  
Then dying, left a blessed memory.  
(l. 11-14)

Later, Anne Bradstreet also wrote her father an epitaph: *To the Memory of my dear and ever honored Father Thomas Dudley Esq.: Who deceased July 31, 1653, and of his Age, 77*. Again, in this poem, the poet's lament for her father's death imply an acceptance of death as a normal event. First, she praises him as a father, whom she loves and owes all she knows:

Who was my Father, Guide, Instructor, too,  
To whom I ought whatever I could doe:  
Who heard or saw, observ'd or knew him better?  
Or who alive than I, a greater debtor?  
(l. 5-10)

Then, she starts praising him as a public man which constitutes the main subject of this poem. She explicitly says that she wants to celebrate his achievement: *while others tell his worth, I'le not be dumb* (l. 22). She mentions his accomplishments which made of him a well known and admired person. He was a dedicated man to his country, just, and truly religious. She emphasizes the Puritan concept of goodness as she says that he did possess titles as he was wise and ambitious yet humble, but certainly his ambition was towards heavenly life. She uses an Economic language to show her gratitude to her father. The earthly economics gives way to divine economy, as the words, *debtor* (l. 10), *worth* (l. 22), *founders*, *staid*, *spent*, *share*, and *tax* suggest:

One of thy Founders, him New England know,  
Who staid thy feeble sides when thou wast low,  
Who spent his state, his strength, and years with care  
That After-comers in them have share.  
True Patriot of his little Commonweal,  
Who is't can tax thee ought, but for thy zeal?  
Truths friend thou wert, to errors still a foe,  
Which cou'd Apostates to maligne so.  
Thy love to true Religion e're shall shine,  
My Fathers God, be God of me and mine.  
Upon the earth he did not build his nest,

But as a Pilgrim, what he had, possest.  
High thoughts he gave no harbour in his heart,  
Nor honours pufft him up, when he had part:  
Those titles loath'd, which some too much love  
For truly his ambition lay above.

(l. 23-38)

Anne Bradstreet celebrates his wise actions and says he is an exemplar of virtuous man to be followed. From line 49 to 60, Bradstreet reinforces her father's achievement as a Puritan man as she stresses that his life on earth had been a preparation for a better life in eternity. She wants to make clear that her father valued heavenly life more than the earthly one, showing her awareness of the doctrinal concepts of her time.

Nor wonder 'twas, low things ne'r much did move  
For he a Mansion had, prepar'd above,  
For which he sign'd and pray'd and long's full sore  
He might be cloath'd upon, for evermore.  
Oft spoke of death, and with a smiling chear,  
He did exult his end was drawing near,  
Now fully ripe, as shock of wheat that is grown  
Death as a sickle hath him timely mown,  
And in celestial Barn hath hous'd him high  
Where storms, nor shows, nor ought can damnifie.  
His Generation serv'd, his labours cease;  
And to his Fathers gathered is in peace.

(l. 49-60)

The wheat metaphor indicates that death at an old age was seen as a normal event by the poet. Her father had lived enough to accomplish many deeds which she celebrates, and death, on such circumstances, is *as a sickle that timely mows the wheat* which is then housed *in celestial Barn*.

The Epitaph that follows the poem summarizes the seventy lines written on the memory of a Patriot who was *pious, just, and wise*. Besides, the word *Patriot* is related to the Latin derivation *virtus*, the root of *virtue*.

His Epitaph  
Within this Tomb a Patriot lyes  
That was both pious, just and wise,  
To Truth a shield, to right a Wall,  
To Sectaryes a whip and Maul,

A Magazine of History,  
A Prizer if goos Company  
In manners pleasant and severe  
The Good him lov'd, the bad did fear;  
And when his time with years was spent  
If some rejoyc'd, more did lament.

Thus, in both poems on the memory of her parents, Anne Bradstreet finds their death acceptable, a normal path which culminates with the belief that toils finally cease with death, thus giving eternal joy in *that happy place* (l. 68).

Nevertheless, in the poem *Upon the Burning of Our House July 10th. 1666. copied out of a Loose Paper*, Anne Bradstreet stands hopelessly before the ruins of those things she loved best. In that house she experienced what she loved the most in her life, many cherishing moments with her family. It is easy to verify her affection for her family in the poem she wrote in 1659 *I had Eight Birds Hatched in One Nest* as well as in those dedicated to her husband and to the other members of her family.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to observe that the poem is an elegy since the poet uses the funeral formula to raise and resolve the question of grief. The language is that of lament and loss. The house is personified in the poem as, in line 29, it is suddenly spoken to in a direct address as if it were human: *Under thy roof no guest shall sit*. The title of the poem brings about the idea of transience and permanence, emphasizing the idea of the eternal through poetry. The *loose paper* registering the house survived the burning, thus establishing her poetry as a negotiation between the temporal and the permanent. The conflict between material and spiritual, temporal and eternal, earthly and heavenly is discussed in this poem. The poet's self is threatened by the burning of the house. The house haunts her as a human being. In this way, a theological problem arises, and Anne Bradstreet does not resolve it. In fact, the house is destroyed and cannot be copied but the poet uses the house in its absence as a way to bring it to the reader. In other words, her actual perception of the house leads her to reconstruct the house in terms of what it isn't.

When by the ruins oft I past  
My sorrowing eyes aside did cast,  
And here and there the places spy  
Where oft I sat and long did lie:  
Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,

There lay that store I counted best.  
My pleasant things in ashes lie,  
And them behold no more shall I.  
(l. 21-28)

Her *sorrowing eyes* indicate her suffering and her reaction against the destruction of her house.

Anne Bradstreet's attachment to the house is so great that, although in the first twenty lines she acknowledges God's presence and justice at all times and in all things, and repeats the Christian teachings from dust to dust (see line 15), the lines that follow show that the person she is cannot be separated from the house. She alludes to *dust* two more times (lines 27 and 39), but the meaning contained in these lines is contrasting to that of line 15. The house was the locus for her self. At that time, it was important to keep a balance between the earthly and the divine economies. In this poem, the earthly economy has been shattered and the poet is trying to find an equilibrium for the two economies. There is then the conflict between the heart (emotion) and the head (mind). The first twenty lines are characterized by the head which are conflicting with the following lines since the heart cannot stop protesting though the head argues that there is another house. Thus, the contrast between earthly and divine values is brought about through the conflict between heart and head, feeling and reason. The two economies, or better, the two houses, are set aside in the poem as the poet laments her loss. It is the heart's language that dominates the poem. The burning house is identified with the heart and the divine house is associated with the head. Besides, the poet identifies herself with the house, and in this context, the house is a woman. The house is part of her and this can be seen through the personification of the house. After having spoken to the house as *thy roof* (l. 28), the poet moves to the ambiguous line *thy wealth on earth abide* (l. 38). Here, the possessive pronoun *thy* can either refer to the poet's address to the house or to a self-reflexive question. However, this ambivalence is clarified in line 43 when the poet argues that *Thou hast an house on high erect* which clearly indicates that she is questioning her own self.

Under thy roof no guest shall sitt,  
Nor at thy Table eat a bitt.  
No pleasant tale shall 'ere be told,  
Nor things recounted done of old.  
No candle 'ere shall shine in Thee,

Nor bridegroom's voice ere heard shall be.  
In silence ever shalt thou lye;  
Adieu, Adieu; All's vanity.  
Then streight I gin my heart to chide,  
And did thy wealth one earth abide?  
Didst fix thy hope on mouldring dust,  
The arm of flesh didst make thy trust?  
Raise up thy thoughts above the skye  
That dunghill mists away may flie.  
Thou hast a house on high erect  
Fram'd by that mighty Architect,  
With glory richly furnished,  
Stands permanent tho' this be fled.  
(l. 29-46)

In this way, Anne Bradstreet tries to resolve the conflict of belief in a metaphysical level (l. 41-46), and attempts to explicate economic language by using earthly and divine values, a transaction in which the temporal life is an investment for the eternal one:

It's purchased, and paid for too  
By him who hath enough to doe.  
A price so vast as is unknown  
(l. 47-49)

She attempts to detach herself from worldly values by convincing herself of the worthlessness of earthly things in contrast to heavenly ones. Yet, she does not sound convincing enough. Thus, in *The Burning of Our House*, Anne Bradstreet rejects the burning of her house as a destruction of a part of her self. She struggles to solve the conflict within herself using her mind in favor of divine values searching for strength in God. But her attachment to earthly values is so strong that her heart speaks too loud and she leaves this questioning unresolved.

The tension between the temporal and eternal values persists in the elegies that Anne Bradstreet wrote in the memory of her three grandchildren and of a daughter-in-law. She struggles to understand and balance these two values; however, the poems are ambiguous about faith. In all these elegies, Anne Bradstreet uses nature to help her contextualize death, but in doing so, death becomes still more inexplicable.

In *Memory of Elizabeth*, for instance, she starts the poem with a repetition followed by a change which indicates that repetitions are not the

same because of the transience of earthly things. The iterated words in these lines (quoted below) and the way the poet modifies them emphasize the idea of the ephemerality of human beings. The *dear, sweet babe* turns into a *fair flower*.

Farewell dear babe, my heart's too much content,  
Farewell sweet babe, the pleasure of mine eye,  
Farewell fair flower that for a space was lent,  
Then ta'en away unto eternity.

(l. 1-4)

The poet questions in the first stanza the conflicting idea of transience and permanence.

Blest babe, why should I once bewail thy fate,  
Or sigh thy days so soon were terminate,  
Sigh thou art settled in an everlasting state.

(l. 5-7)

If the child is eternal, how can she be taken away? The paradoxical idea of impermanence and eternal life pertaining to the same being troubles Anne Bradstreet. She admits that she shouldn't be lamenting and sighing the child's death since the girl is now in an *everlasting state*. Yet, she cannot refrain herself from doing so and from questioning the fate of human beings. The second stanza seems to bring a resolution to the problem through the use of the nature metaphor, since transience in nature is divinely ordained and death is presented as an inevitability. Nevertheless, it is explicit that death should happen only at the right moment, when trees are grown, fruits are ripe, and corn and grass are in their right season to be mown. The poet can accept this process of ripening which indicates death at an old age, as the reader recalls her use of the wheat metaphor associated with her father's death. On the other hand, the poet vehemently rejects the idea of death at an early age, and she demonstrates it when she undercuts the first four lines of the second stanza with a disjunctive conjunction, showing her opposition.

But plants new set to be eradicate,  
And buds new blown to have a short a date,  
Is by His hand alone that guides nature and fate

(l. 12-14)



To Anne Bradstreet, death at an early age violates the normal order of nature. Yet, the poet knows that nature and fate are guided by the hands of God and her lament turns into a word for God. Thus, the poem ends with a complicated statement that, simultaneously, is and is not a consolation, a statement that permeates the boundaries between belief and non-belief.

The poem *In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Anne Bradstreet* is perhaps the one that the poet protests the most. She is the most bitter and a tone of irony resounds in the lines. The language is tight and the poet shows the tension she feels in face of the transience of earthly life. We are *fading things* and the poet criticizes herself for relying on temporal values and for being too naive in relation to hope and happiness in this life.

When I on fading things my hopes have set?  
Experience might' fore this have made me wise,  
To value things according to their price:  
Was ever stable joy yet found below,  
Or perfect bliss without mixture of woe?

(l. 3-8)

The questions she raises emphasize her revolt and disbelief in relation to earthly life. She uses several images of fading things to convey the idea of ephemerality. The child is like a *withering flour*, *a bubble*, *the brittle grass*, or *a shadow*. The poet in this poem is extremely disturbed by the transience of earthly beings. The revolt she feels with this child's death makes her consider herself *a fool* for giving too much praise for *impermanent* things. The only apparent consolation she finds is the certainty of her own death which will take her to a place near to her grandchild.

The elegy on the grandchild Simon Bradstreet also shows the poet's suffering and anxiety. In this poem, however, the poet's voice presents an apparent resignation and consolation. The rhythm is smooth which conveys tiredness. She alludes to the other two children's deaths which indicates that one death recalls the others and that the process of death is constantly present in our lives. Although presenting this tone of apparent resignation, Anne Bradstreet undercuts this smooth rhythm with the disjunctive conjunction *yet*. *Yet is He good*, she writes. The ambiguity of this line raises some questions. Does *yet* here mean "nonetheless," "however," or "still?" What if the line is a question? The conflict of belief and non-belief not only would be persistent but also greater. It would confirm the idea that

Anne Bradstreet's theological doubt still existed when the poet was at the age of 57.<sup>8</sup>

According to Wendy Martin (1984:18), this elegy which was written three years before her own death *reveals deep reservation about the wisdom of God's decision.*

With dreadful awe before him let's be mute,  
Such was his will, but why, let's not dispute,  
With humble hearts and mouths put in the dust,  
Let's say he's merciful as well as just.

(l. 5-8)

The adjective *dreadful* suggests that the muteness the occasion brings is an attitude resulted from fear, not admiration. It is an acceptance achieved by reasoning. Nonetheless, the adjective *dreadful* also reveals that there is anxiety in her words. She accepts death as God's will, but the lack of understanding of *such a will* is evident as she keeps questioning *but why* specially being the interrogative pronoun preceded by the conjunction *but* which indicates opposition. The conflicting attitude here is alternated as she makes an assertive statement by accepting loss which she immediately undercuts with doubt and resistance. She proceeds saying *let's not dispute* showing resignation in her attitude but not total and free acceptance. Her voice is suffocated with anxiety and the question *why* still exists and persists. The next line, *with humble hearts and mouths put in the dust* suggests man's ignorance in face of life and death, as *dust* alludes both to the creation of humans as well as to the last state of man's existence. This attitude of resignation without understanding, acceptance without alternative is culminated with the words *let's say he's merciful as well as just*, which simply suggest an alternative, something we have heard and learned. This attitude does not indicate a decisive resolution on her part, but an alternative out of despair for such an inexplicable situation. It can be seen as an attempt to try to accommodate things; yet, there is no satisfaction or conviction involved.

Thus, death of infants is not seen as a normal happening to her. It shocks her and it is not accepted and understood. She shows her inability to grasp the mystery of death. Wendy Martin remarks that *although Bradstreet never renounced her religious faith, she observed that if it were not for the fortunate fact of dissolution and decay, she would not seek salvation.*<sup>9</sup> It is the earthly human condition, the uncertainty of

existence on earth that leads man to look for eternity. This need to find relief by the belief in eternal life is a way to show dissatisfaction with earthly life. It is a necessity to compensate for human anxieties.

The elegy of her daughter-in-law Mercy is the one Anne Bradstreet seems to be the most resigned. The poem presents the grief of a woman who was struck by the undesirable death several times. In this poem she shows her suffering which is deep, but she seems to be without strength even to complain. Her voice seems to flow normally, without surprise, or excess of emotion. It is the voice of a mature and tired woman who does not struggle any longer. She accepts with resignation and is still able to advise her son to have faith, although in line 26 she expresses doubt when she says *All freed from grief (I trust) among the blast*. There is no way to ignore the parenthetical *I trust* as a felt exclamation of sorrow mixed with ironic resignation. Many times the poet asks God for a sign of his existence, and so, this phrase cannot be unnoticeable.

Anne Bradstreet emphasizes the love she feels for Mercy and her children by the use of the tree metaphor. She is part of the tree that fell and she stands at the Root:

I saw the branches lopt the Tree now fall,  
I stood so nigh, it crusht me down withal;  
My bruised heart lies sobbing at the Root,  
That thou dear Son hath lost both Tree and fruit.

(l. 5-8)

There is also implied in these lines the idea of the loss of a generation that would perpetuate her life. It is interesting to observe that though she feels extremely sorrow for the death of her daughter-in-law whom she calls *daughter*, she knows and makes it clear that her son's sorrow is more intense than hers. It is the voice of the mother feeling sorrow for her son, directly suffering the pain of the loss of a daughter-in-law and grandchildren, and yet, it is the voice of the wise woman who is able to see that her son's suffering was greater because he had lost a wife.

Oh how I simpathize with thy sad heart,  
And in thy griefs still bear a second part:  
I lost a daughter dear, but thou a wife,  
Who lov'd thee more (it seem'd) than her own life.

(l. 13-16)

These lines also remind the reader of the poet's love for her husband and the strong relationship they shared so that she knows that her son's pain and loss is even greater than her own.

Thus, the deaths of Anne Bradstreet's grandchildren might indicate an undercut in the idea of perpetuation through generations. This fact was exemplified after the death of her grand-daughter Anne, Bradstreet's namesake. In a sense, this death is "Anne" a few generations later already gone. There is no doubt that the poet feels her self threatened by the deaths of her grandchildren and the burning of her house. Although presenting a tone of apparent resignation and acceptance in her last elegies, the conflict between the temporal and eternal, the belief and non-belief still persists through a mild protest from a woman tired of being struck by loss of material possessions and premature deaths of her loved ones. Thus, the perpetual question: "why is there death" was raised and left open for all individuals.

#### RESUMO

Os poemas de Anne Bradstreet, em que a autora contempla suas perdas terrestres, ilustram uma atitude dogmática e conflituosa entre a crença e a descrença. A ansiedade da autora emerge da tensão entre os valores mundanos e divinos, temporais e eternos. Entretanto, o dilema perpétuo da morte permanece para todos os indivíduos.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Although having been struck by illness many times during her lifetime, Anne Bradstreet lived to the age of 60 and her eight children also lived to maturity. PIERCY, Josephine. *Anne Bradstreet*. New York: Twayne, Publishers, Inc., 1965. p. 92.
- 2 Anne Bradstreet's poems were first published by a devoted brother-in-law, John Woodbridge, who in a trip to England, took with him the poet's manuscripts without her knowledge and had them published in England as *The Tenth Muse*. His preface to the book acknowledges Anne Bradstreet as a dedicated wife, loving mother, pious woman whose poems were *the fruit but of some few hours, curtailed from her sleep and other refreshments*. See EBERWEIN, Jane Donahue. *Early American Poetry*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978. p.3-13.
- 3 The *new circumstances* refers to her move from England to the New World and how her life changed and the hardships she found in New England. PIERCY, Josephine (op.cit.:26).

- 4 Eberwein (op.cit.:9) argues that Anne Bradstreet knew she *must always be prepared to yield these goods in favor of eternal ones, and her poetry records the painful effort of will it took her to echo Job in blessing His name that gave and took.*
- 5 It might be interesting to recall Anne Hutchinson's and Anne Hopkin's positions. Neither was as fortunate as Anne Bradstreet in their attempt to reveal their thoughts and ideas. There is no doubt that Anne Bradstreet was aware of what had happened to them. See Josephine Piercy for an account of these women's trials. See also STANFORD, Ann, *Anne Bradstreet: The Wordly Puritan*. New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1974.
- 6 All citations of Anne Bradstreet's works are from HUTCHINSON, Robert. *Poems of Anne Bradstreet*. New York: Dover Publication, Inc., 1969.
- 7 Mainly Anne Bradstreet's domestic poems show the poet's attachment and love for earthly values. As Josephine Piercy (op.cit.:88) points out, Anne Bradstreet's *unashamed passion for her adored and adoring husband resulted in a troubled conscience*. Some of her poems, for instance, *The Flesh and The Spirit*, reflect the conflict of a woman surrounded by Puritans who were theoretically opposed to the world of the flesh and devil.
- 8 Anne Bradstreet was born in 1612. Her grandchild Simon died on November, 1669, Elizabeth on August 1665, and Anne on June 1669. They were the children of the same mother, who also died in 1670, after giving birth to a premature and short-lived daughter. The elegy on this daughter-in-law, Mercy, Samuel's wife, is also included in this study.
- 9 Anne Bradstreet's own words confirm Wendy Martin's statement: *for were earthly comforts permanent, who would look for heavenly?* MARTIN, Wendy. *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1984. p. 18.

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