

# Bridging the gap



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Bridging the Gap January 28, 2014 Poetry of the 17th century is unique because it is of a metaphysical nature and it is deeper in meaning than the courtly love poetry before its time. It focuses on love, death, and loss other than death such as innocence and material possessions. The seemingly impossible things such as the afterlife and Heaven are said to be metaphysical in nature and both subjects are present in the three selected poems for this paper. Ben Jonson exhibits grief upon the loss of his first daughter and his first son in the poems “ On My First Son” and “ On My First Daughter”, but his grief is displayed in different tones.

Anne Bradstreet exhibits grief over the loss of her home and all of her material possessions in “ Here Follows Some Verses Upon the Burning of Our House July 10th, 1666”, but her grief turns into a comforting tone as she realizes her true possessions are in Heaven, not on Earth. “ Thou hast a house on high erect, framed by that mighty Architect, with glory richly furnished” (Ferguson, Salter, & Stallworthy, 2005, p. 467). The three chosen poems deal with loss and grief.

The poet of each poem expresses religious beliefs in Heaven and the afterlife and a comforting tone is exhibited for the reader to find comfort in the possibility that a better life exists beyond life on Earth. Ben Jonson was a poet born in 1572 and died in 1637. His work is often considered classical dramatics. His poem “ On My First Son” expresses sorrow for the death of his first son. The poem is an elegy which means the poem is a serious reflection and a mournful poem about the dead. This is a twelve line poem with six pairs of rhyming couplets. Line five is the most emotional line. “ O could I lose all father now! ” (Ferguson et al. p. 323). Jonson tries to see death as an

escape from the world. There is a calmer tone later in the poem as the poet is speaking in a more positive mood, seeing his son as his finest creation. The poem is written from the 17th century England and childhood illnesses were often fatal. Hospitals, vaccinations against diseases, antibiotics and treatments were unknown during that time. Many children did not live very long. When they died, parents reacted to their death in a different manner than people in current society react to the death of a child. The poem is delivered in rhyming lines called couplets and it is addressed to the dead son.

Metaphor is present when Jonson refers to his son as being lent to him. For seven years. “ Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay exacted by thy fate, on the just day” (Ferguson et al. , p. 323). Jonson believes that all life is a gift from God, and now God is taking back his child at a young and tender age of seven. As Jonson grieves over his son, he also shows the reader how death is something to be envied. Perhaps death is something to look forward to. This feeling is explained in lines seven and eight when Jonson states “ To have so soon scaped world’s and flesh’s rage, and, if no other miser, yet age” (Ferguson et al. p. 323). An escape from the turmoil that one encounters throughout life is escaped by death. Jonson also vows to not become too attached or to love someone too much in the future so he will not feel so much pain again. Jonson also wrote “ On My First Daughter” which is an elegy about his first daughter who died at the age of six months old. In this poem, Jonson believes nothing lasts forever and death is inevitable. Written in the 17th century, childhood death was not uncommon.

Jonson delivers sadness as well as a feeling of comfort and belief that the poet's baby girl is in Heaven.

A hidden message in this poem is that death is not the final destination. The religious thoughts throughout the poem offer peace and comfort about death and the afterlife. " Yet all Heaven's gifts being Heaven's due" (Ferguson et al. , p. 323) insinuates that nothing lasts forever and death is inevitable. Jonson sees his daughter's death as if she belongs to God and now God has taken her back. This twelve line poem contains six pairs of rhyming couplets. Lines three and four demonstrate a rationalization of the death as well as the ability for Jonson to overcome his emotions more than a woman could. Yet all heaven's gifts being Heaven's due, it makes the father less to rue" (Ferguson et al. , p. 323). He also finds comfort in knowing he lost his daughter to death with her innocence intact. Because she died with her innocence, there is a special honor of believing she is honored in Heaven and Jonson finds comfort in the sad event of his daughter's death. Jonson uses rationalism in his poems as he reasons with the death of his children. " On My First Daughter" has a different attitude and delivery from the attitude and delivery regarding his son's death in " On My First Son".

He appears to accept his daughter's death with less grief than his acceptance of his son's death. The length of time he had with his daughter and his son could also determine the tone he took in each poem. He could have bonded with his 7-year-old son as where he did not bond with the 6-month-old daughter. He does however find comfort in believing both children are in Heaven and free from pain. He believes Heaven is a better place than living on Earth. Anne Bradstreet, born in 1612 and died in 1672, is the 17th

century Puritan author of “ Here Follows Some Verses Upon the Burning of Our House July 10th, 1616”.

Her subjects within her poems were home, life, relationships, living, sorrow, and grief. Her faith and values are apparent throughout the poem. The rhyming of every two lines allows the reader to process the words before going to the next two lines. The nine six-line stanzas are written in plain style. The Puritan in Bradstreet preferred a plain style of writing that rarely included figurative language. She stressed simplicity, clarity of expression, the use of everyday words, and the implied metaphor even though most of her images and words are literal throughout her poem.

The context of Bradstreet’s poem is the 17th century Puritan colonies in North America. The theme of the poem is that material possessions are worthless and the only thing that is worthy is going to Heaven in the afterlife. The reader takes a journey through the descriptions of Bradstreet’s possessions before her true feelings are revealed regarding loss, material possessions, and a person’s salvation in Heaven. There are obvious sentence inversions to accommodate the demands of rhyme. This is present in the first line of the poem “ In silent night when rest I took for sorrow near I did not look” (Ferguson et al. p. 466). The speaker becomes aware of her house burning down and she informs her readers about the material objects in a material world. Pain and loss are explored while memories and fantasies about her home are revealed. “ No pleasant tale shall e’er be told, nor things recounted done of old” (Ferguson et al. , p. 467). The statement reveals a woman mourning the material loss while also mourning the lost years of an

imagined future in her house. The turning point in the poem occurs when the speaker is finished grieving over the ruins of her home.

She begins to realize that she should focus on her home in Heaven and the beautiful afterlife she will have rather than her home on Earth. The last two lines of the poem express to the reader how the speaker truly feels. “ My world no longer let me love, my hope and treasure lies above” (Ferguson et al. , p. 467). Bradstreet, like Jonson, finds comfort in believing in the afterlife and having faith that Heaven is where good and Holy people will spend eternity. Heaven, in both author’s beliefs, is a better place than living on Earth.

The gift of Heaven through good works was a common belief during the 17th century. Jonson and Bradstreet both suffered a great loss. Jonson lost two children to death while Bradstreet lost her home and all of her possessions to a fire. They both grieved over their loss but in a different way. The end of each poem confirms the author’s religious beliefs that Heaven and the afterlife are better than life here on Earth. References Ferguson, M. , Salter, M. J. , & Stallworthy, J. (Eds. ). (2005). *The Norton anthology of poetry* (5th ed. ). New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.