

Transcending the
cosmos in "a summer
evening's meditation"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

"A Summer Evening's Meditation" is a poem by Anna Letitia Barbauld that was published in 1773. The poem details the expansive thoughts of the speaker who is reflecting and philosophizing upon a summer evening's sky. In this poem, Barbauld carries readers through the cosmos for a transcendental experience with her poetic stylization and by use of literary devices, specifically personification. Through personification of planets and stars, Barbauld communicates the speaker's feeling of divine connection to nature. Barbauld's "A Summer Evening's Meditation" is a Romantic presentation of an astral projection-like meditative experience that leads to a greater knowledge of the self and a closer connection to God.

The poem begins at the close of day, and the speaker of the poem is eased by the sun's setting because the night sky allows for a more meditative state of mind. Barbauld describes the sun as an oppressive figure who stifles the wonders of the night sky through personification. This portrayal of the sun highlights the importance of the temporal setting of night time for the speaker's transcendental experience; further, this attribution of humanlike qualities to the sun allows the speaker to understand the sun in a more meaningful manner. Barbauld opens the poem with an exclamatory remark to emphasize the importance of the sun's setting. She writes,

'Tis past! The sultry tyrant of the south

Has spent his short-lived rage; more grateful hours

Move silent on; the skies no more repel

The dazzled sight ... (1-4)

Barbauld's personification of the sun as a "sultry tyrant" emphasizes the relief felt by the speaker at sunset. The sun does not merely shine; rather, it rages on oppressively with stifling heat, humidity, and brightness. The stars, which Barbauld depicts as having feminine beauty and soft, flowing grace, are "repelled" by the sun's harsh nature. The nighttime is personified as being the "more grateful hours" of the day, and this implies that the sun is ungrateful. It is clear that the sun is the enemy of the speaker's meditative mind.

As the burdensome sun sets, the moon and the stars begin to glisten in the night sky, and the speaker of the poem finds herself in a state of contemplation. In contrast to the negative connotation given to the sun through Barbauld's use of personification, the moon and the stars are personified through terms of radiance and favorability. Barbauld, personifying the moon in contrast to the sun, writes,

... but with mild maiden beams

Of tempered lustre court the cherished eye

To wander o'er their sphere; where, hung aloft,

Dian's bright crescent, like a silver bow

New strung in heaven, lifts high its beamy horns

Impatient for the night, and seems to push

Her brother down the sky. (4-10)

Unlike the sun, which is personified as an oppressive figure, the night sky is personified as an inviting and gentle female figure. The depiction of the moonbeam's luster "courting" the "cherished eye" showcases the tone with which Barbauld approaches the night sky. Through her personification of the moon, Barbauld creates a connection between the speaker and the moon that goes beyond simple stargazing. The moon beckons the speaker's eyes to scan the sky, to find peace in the expansive night sky and its endless beauty and opportunity. Unlike the ungrateful sun, the moon is impatient, or eager, to hang in the sky and shine her own light. Barbauld's personification of the moon is gentle and encouraging. Based on Barbauld's personification of the moon, it is understood that the moon offers the time and the space for solitude and reflection. Contrasted against the tyrannical daylight, the soft, ethereal light of the moon offers the speaker an opportunity to reflect.

In addition to personifying the sun and moon, Barbauld continues to employ personification throughout the poem to depict other planets and stars in the cosmos. This concept of adding humanlike attributes to the planets and stars is conventional of the Romantic literary tradition because it allows for the speaker to connect with nature on a spiritual level. The planets and stars are not simply bodies of gas; they epitomize the power of God's divinity. The night sky invokes a meditative mind in the speaker which allows her to view the cosmos from a philosophical perspective. The speaker, imagining herself floating through space, existing as one with the planets, feels a divine connection to the cosmos. The speaker views "solitary Mars," Jupiter, who "dances in ether like the lightest leaf," and "cheerless Saturn," who "sits like an exiled monarch" (75-81). As the speaker of the poem, in her meditative

state, begins to visualize herself drifting into the ether, she recognizes these planets and stars as their own sentient beings with a purposeful existence. It is through this personification of the night sky that the speaker comes to understand the concept of a living, breathing, and interconnected cosmos that exemplifies God's power and divinity.

The speaker of the poem experiences serenity in the silence of the night, and this nurtures her ability to understand nature in a spiritually meaningful way. By visualizing herself among the stars in this astral projection-like experience, the speaker views the planets and stars as representations of God's glorious creation, and she comes to realize the divinity in herself by seeing the divinity of the night's sky. Barbauld writes,

... Or is there not

A tongue in every star, that talks with man,

And woos him to be wise? nor woos in vain:

This dead of midnight is the noon of thought,

And Wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars. (48-52)

Continuing her use of personification, Barbauld depicts the stars much like she depicts the moon. Like the moon, the stars call to the speaker; they woo her to seek some greater knowledge from their flickering. The speaker gains a closer understanding of herself and God by transcending her earthly form and aligning herself with the stars. For the speaker of the poem, the beauty of the stars captures the essence of God's presence. It is at night, when the

stars flicker and the moonlight softens the sky, that the speaker can witness the overwhelming yet humbling expanse of God's creation.

In conclusion, Barbauld's "A Summer Evening's Meditation" demonstrates a conventionally Romantic portrayal of a starlit meditation that transforms into a transcendental astral projection-like experience which spiritually ignites the speaker. By utilizing personification in her writing, Barbauld pinpoints the divine connection that the speaker feels when reflecting upon the night sky. It is through this recognition of the divine interconnectedness of the cosmos and her place within them that the speaker realizes that she can find God in herself just as she finds God in the stars. In the poem, the night sky encourages a state of contemplation, and this state of contemplation allows for the speaker to transcend her physical state to gain a closer connection to God.

Work Cited

Barbauld, Anna Letitia. "A Summer Evening's Meditation." The Norton Anthology of English Literature, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 9th ed., D, W. W. Norton, 2012, pp. 43-45.