

An analysis of  
bradstreet's "a letter  
to her husband,  
absent upon publick  
employm..."



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Anne Bradstreet is one of the most prominent literary figures of the colonial era of American history, and she is often cited as one of the primary sources of Puritan literature. Some of her work carried undertones of pre-First-Wave feminism because she subtly alluded to certain gender inequities, at least for those who can read between the lines. "A Letter to Her Husband, absent upon Publick Employment" is one of the staple examples of how she accomplished this, especially in a way that was still endearing to men who heard only what they wanted to hear.

In "A Letter to Her Husband, absent upon Publick Employment," the speaker discusses the differences between her mind and her heart, as well as between her eyes and her life; what many men likely missed in their time was that she is alluding to her husband with each of these things. The reader only knows this because the speaker continues to call him her joy and her "magazine of earthly store" and then personify these things by suggesting that they are collectively one entity who is away from her. She characterizes this period of his absence as a winter, and she mourns it as though he were dead. In contrast, she goes on to characterize times of his presence as periods in which she feels no storm or cold, so she pleads that he return to her and end her "dead time." She even mentions that looking at their children is difficult because they remind her of him.

Calling her husband her "magazine of earthly store" references the Biblical notion expressed in similar wording of inhabiting this sinful world before ascending to heaven in the afterlife. She uses this to mean that, apart from God himself, her husband is her everything. It is most important, though, that the reader understand that her husband is not dead, which is an easy

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misconception to make; rather, he is simply on a business trip. The first feminist undertone appears here implicitly in the simple fact that she is confined to the house, and the speaker goes on to describe her situation. She does not want to be there while her husband is not there, and she describes it as a winter period. She also says her limbs lie cold without him, painting this picture of a house that is not so much a home as it is a cold prison.

The speaker employs Zodiac imagery to describe the seasonal cycle mentioned earlier, and she references Zodiac signs throughout the poem. The sun occupies its highest point where the Capricorn constellation was in the summer, and in the winter, days are shorter and colder. The coldness now takes on a meaning that is as literal as it is figurative because it draws the reader's mind to the loneliness she describes while also directly referencing the seasonal cycle. This is why her husband's return is likened to the period when the sun occupies Cancer, a warm time that occurs in the summer.

The underlying issue in this poem, though, is not a seasonal or sexual one about solely the loneliness of the speaker. The poem is really pointing to something that is even more significant than these things. Ultimately, she is looking at her situation in a very literal way, but the poet, Bradstreet, intends for the reader to critically analyze the sentiments the speaker in the poem is expressing. The speaker is talking about this coldness, loneliness, and so forth in a very specific, deliberate way. She chooses her words carefully, and she often has many choices at her disposal for what word to use in several of her lines. There are numerous synonyms for several of the key words she

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uses in the poem, but she says everything she says for a very specific effect that she wants to impose upon the reader so as to evoke a certain response.

The reality of what the speaker is expressing to her husband, as well as what Bradstreet is expressing to the reader, is something that fleshes out the remainder of the meaning of the title of the poem. So far, the discussion has only even really substantiated the first half of the poem's title, but the second half points to what it is that eludes the speaker: public employment. When she continually expresses sadness about the fact that her husband is away from her, she always does so in a way that puts the action and power in his hands. It is he has the power to come and go at will while she is imprisoned in the home. Similarly, it is the husband who is empowered with a job and consequently financial security, and in a manner of speaking, that job and financial security go with him any time he leaves, which is a serious concern.

What the speaker is truly highlighting is the gender inequality of their society or, at the very least, of their marriage. She does not have the liberty to earn a living for herself, and she is no less dependent on her husband than their children are despite the fact that, any son she may have, will eventually be much more independent than she because he will mature to an age at which he can get a job, earn a living, and own property. Granted, there is a sexual element to the poem, albeit it a subtle one. At the very most, there is reference to the idea of the speaker perhaps being sexually frustrated. Once again, this like many other observations is dependent upon analyzing her word choice and acknowledging that she had many other words and phrases to choose from instead. She calls her limbs chilled and numb, claiming that <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-bradstreets-a-letter-to-her-husband-absent-upon-publick-employment/>

they now lie forlorn, which could double as a reference to her spurned, sexual desire. She also makes other potential double entendres like referring to her children as the fruits she bore through his heat, which is slightly less subtle than the previous example, and she even furthers it to call it a strange effect that comes over her when she looks at them seemingly because she recalls their conception. Bradstreet is unusually sensual in her writing for a Puritan woman, and this much is especially clear in this poem.

Even so, that which is sensual about the poem is likely only the surface detail, which can only serve to distract from the true substance underneath it all. Bradstreet wrote this poem with a very sensitive understanding of her place in her society as a Puritan woman. Very little opportunity was afforded her or her peers simply because of their sex, and their sex actually determined their station. In a postmodern society, there are still elements of women's lives that are symptomatic of this same problem, and in many areas of the world, progress from this point is next to nonexistent. The poem highlights which explorations and freedoms are traditionally designated for women, and which are not.