Before the Birth of One of Her Children

POEM TEXT

All things within this fading world hath end,
Adversity doth still our joyes attend;
No ties so strong, no friends so dear and sweet,
But with death's parting blow is sure to meet.
The sentence past is most irrevocable,
A common thing, yet oh inevitable.
How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,
How soon't may be thy Lot to lose thy friend,
We are both ignorant, yet love bids me
These farewell lines to recommend to thee,
That when that knot's untied that made us one,
I may seem thine, who in effect am none.
And if I see not half my dayes that's due,
What nature would, God grant to yours and you;
The many faults that well you know I have
Let be interr'd in my oblivious grave;
If any worth or virtue were in me,
Let that live freshly in thy memory
And when thou feel'st no grief, as I no harms,
Yet love thy dead, who long lay in thine arms.
And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains
Look to my little babes, my dear remains.
And if thou love thyself, or loved'st me,
These o protect from step Dames injury.
And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,
With some sad sighs honour my absent Herse;
And kiss this paper for thy loves dear sake,
Who with salt tears this last Farewel did take.

SUMMARY

Everything in this fleeting world dies, and hardship follows every joy; there are no human connections strong enough, no friendships special enough, that they can escape the separation of death. Death (and God's judgment) cannot be undone: they're humanity's shared, normal, and unavoidable fate. Indeed, my beloved husband, very soon I may die. Very soon, it may be your misfortune to lose your dear wife. And though whether or not I will die in childbirth is still a mystery to us both, the love I have for you compels me to write you this goodbye poem, and remind you that, should our marriage come to an end at my death, I am still yours, even if I am gone. And if I don't even live out half of the years I should get on earth, I hope that God grants the extra time nature owes me to you and our children instead. As for my many flaws, of which you are well aware—bury those in my forgetful grave. Instead, if I have any good points, remember those. And even when you no longer feel grief, and I no longer feel pain, please go on loving me, the woman who lay in your arms for so many years. And when you replace me with a new wife, take care of my little babies, the dear children I leave behind. For if you love yourself, or really loved me, then oh, you will be sure to protect our babies from a stepmother's cruelty. And if you should happen to read this poem again one day, please honor my memory with some mournful sighs, and kiss the paper this poem is written on in recognition of your lost love, who wrote these words of goodbye with tears in her eyes.

THEMES

THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH

"Before the Birth of One of Her Children," is, as the title suggests, a poem about childbirth. Nevertheless, its main concern is not life, but death. The poem was written in the 17th century, when women often died in labor. Throughout the poem, the pregnant speaker accepts her vulnerability as an expectant mother, demonstrating her levelheaded outlook on death. This practical acceptance of her own mortality suggests that death is simply a fact of life that people ought to expect and prepare for rather than fear.

The speaker establishes this down-to-earth tone early in the poem, noting that all living things die, and every joy is shadowed by hardship. The speaker then explicitly counts herself among those for whom "death's parting blow" is destined, noting "how soon [...] death may my steps attend." Taken in context with the poem's title, this statement acknowledges the danger that the speaker faces as a woman about to give birth in a time when it was very common for women to die in labor.

Accepting this reality doesn't mean the speaker isn't emotional about dying. She sheds "salt tears" as she thinks about the possibility, expressing love and sorrow for the husband and children who will survive her. Throughout the poem, she expresses a clear love of life despite its hardships, naming "friends so dear and sweet" and her "little babes" among the "joyes" of her existence.

Nevertheless, the speaker clearly views death as an unavoidable reality, describing it as "a common thing, yet oh

inevitable" that should therefore be addressed matter-of-factly rather than fearfully. This acceptance of her own mortality allows her to prepare herself (and her family) for her death. The speaker coaches her husband on how to cope with loss, and even generously wishes that, should she die in childbirth, God will bestow the lost days of her life on her husband and her children instead.

By accepting death as inevitable, the speaker is able to prepare herself and her family to face human mortality.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6

REMEMBRANCE AND LEGACY

Throughout "Before the Birth of One of Her Children," the speaker worries about death's impact on her legacy. Her final request, after all, is that her memory be honored and sustained not only through her children, but through the words she leaves behind. Childbirth and poetry thus become ways for her to leave a lasting part of herself in the world after she dies.

Concerned with the memory she will leave behind, the speaker wants her husband to remember her virtues instead of her flaws. She asks that he metaphorically bury—or forget—her "many faults," hoping that her virtues will instead "live freshly in [his] memory." The fact that the speaker is so concerned with how her husband remembers her suggests that she's more worried about how she'll be remembered than about the fact that she might die.

The speaker then worries for a more tangible form of her legacy: her children. She anticipates that her husband will eventually recover from his grief and remarry, so she asks him to protect their children: "Look to my little babes, my dear remains. / [...] protect [them] from step Dames injury." Here, the speaker understands that her memory will live on not only in the abstract, but also through the physical "remains" that she leaves behind in the form of her children's bodies.

Last but not least, the speaker extends her legacy to include the literary. She closes by asking her husband to cherish this very poem, imploring him to one day "kiss this paper for thy loves dear sake." In other words, the speaker also sees her poetry as an important aspect of her "remains." This final instruction to honor and preserve her poem reveals the speaker's understanding (and desire) that the words she leaves behind will also keep her "alive" in the world—even after her death.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-12
- Lines 15-18
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 23-24
- Lines 25-28

MOTHERHOOD AND CHILDBIRTH

For a poem titled in honor of a child's upcoming birth, "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" doesn't say much about the particulars of childbirth or motherhood. Instead, it focuses on the possibility that the speaker might die in labor, and the way the speaker hopes her husband will handle the aftermath of that possible tragedy. And yet, the speaker's explicit love for her husband and concern for her children suggest that she views the risks of childbirth as worthwhile and important. Ultimately, the poem accomplishes a complex feat, remaining realistic about the hardships that mothers faced in the 17th century, but also joyfully celebrating motherhood in *spite* of its dangers.

Though the poem opens by accepting the inevitability of death, it also immediately mentions the "joyes" of life on earth. Several references to earthly pleasures and delights—"friends so dear and sweet," "long lay[ing] in thine arms," and the suggestion that more time on earth is the speaker's "due"—make clear that the speaker truly enjoys and cherishes her life.

What's more, the speaker's preoccupation with how her husband should proceed in the event of her death shows her deep appreciation of family life. Her love for her husband is clear throughout the poem: she writes that it is "love [that] bids [her]" to write "these farewell lines," and describes her potential death as the metaphorical untying of the "knot[]" that "made [them] one." Likewise, her care and concern for her children, whom she fondly refers to as "my little babes, my dear remains," is obvious. Her implication that her children are her "remains"—or legacy—on earth shows that motherhood is an important and meaningful part of the speaker's identity.

At the same time, the poem makes it painfully clear that death during childbirth was common in the 1600s: motherhood was a dangerous endeavor. The speaker's concern with how her family will cope in the event of her death emphasizes the devastating nature of such a loss—but her matter-of-fact tone also conveys how absolutely ordinary such a tragedy would be. The result is a clear-eyed depiction of motherhood's dangers and difficulties.

In short, the poem demonstrates that motherhood is a bit of a paradox, carrying with it both joy and despair—both life and death. The speaker risks losing everything she loves in the very process of making *more* children to love. She sees childbirth as the price she pays for the joy of raising children, even if it might kill her. The moving final line, in which the speaker reveals that she is shedding "salt tears" as she pens these words, captures the depth of the speaker's emotions as she grapples with the

dueling risks and rewards of motherhood.

Ultimately, by depicting motherhood as something worth mourning, the poem implies that it's *also* something worth celebrating. This perspective feels especially profound given the era in the which the poem was written, when relatively few poems about motherhood—or by women, for that matter—were published at all.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 19-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

All things within this fading world hath end,
Adversity doth still our joyes attend;
No ties so strong, no friends so dear and sweet,
But with death's parting blow is sure to meet.

"Before the Birth of One of Her Children" opens with a broad meditation on death. The speaker calmly lays out the facts: all living things must die, and life's joys eventually come to an end.

Taken together with the poem's title, these lines establish the speaker's identity and mindset. While the title tells readers that the speaker is about to give birth, the four opening lines jump immediately to birth's opposite: death. All this suggests that this speaker lives in a world where death in childbirth is so common it's almost unremarkable.

But the speaker's tone betrays no surprise or discomfort with this connection. Instead, from the get-go, the poem links birth and death, suggesting that, in this speaker's mind, the two go hand in hand. Though it seems that death looms large in the speaker's mind—birth receives no mention apart from the title—the speaker is quite comfortable with this dark subject. She sees death as a simple fact of life, to be discussed calmly and with control.

A regular rhyme scheme of couplets and the steady rhythm of iambic pentameter give both the poem and its speaker an unflappable tone. (See the Rhyme Scheme and Meter sections for more on that.) And listen to the way alliteration supports the first two lines' meaning:

> All things within this fading world hath end,
> Adversity doth still our joyes attend;

Here, the /w/ sound connects the "fading world" to everything "within" it, while the repeated /a/ sound reflects what it describes: "Adversity," or suffering, patiently "attend[s]" even the greatest joy, waiting to strike.

LINES 5-6

The sentence past is most irrevocable,
A common thing, yet oh inevitable.

In lines 5-6, readers get a clue about the speaker's identity: like the author, Anne Bradstreet, this speaker is likely a Puritan, a member of a strict Protestant sect in 17th-century colonial America.

When the speaker metaphorically calls death "the sentence past," she's alluding to the Puritan belief that God's judgment, or "sentence," awaits all people upon their death. Perhaps she's also referring to the poem's underlying concern with childbirth. Puritans saw labor pains as another part of God's "sentence": women's punishment for Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

As in the poem's opening, and with true Puritan fatalism, the speaker responds to this "sentence" with composure. She calmly describes it as "irrevocable," once again making it clear that she accepts death as a simple fact of life. In the following line, she describes death as "a common thing," and also an "inevitable," or unavoidable, one. The use of the word "thing" emphasizes just how ordinary the speaker finds this subject. To her, death is a mere "thing," not a great tragedy or a terrifying monster.

Sandwiched in the middle of a line, her unemotional exclamation, "oh," reads like a passing, familiar sigh:

> The sentence past is most irrevocable,
> A common thing, yet oh inevitable.

These lines cement the speaker's acceptance of death as a fact of life, and ground that acceptance in her religious worldview.

LINES 7-8

How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,
How soon't may be thy Lot to lose thy friend,

In lines 7 and 8, the poem pivots, as the speaker grapples for the first time with the idea that *she* may soon die. Using parallelism—in this case, the repetition of "how soon" at the beginning of each line—the poem grows more urgent as the speaker's discussion of death becomes more personal:

> How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,
> How soon't may be thy Lot to lose thy friend,

This section also introduces an apostrophe: a direct address to the speaker's husband, whom she refers to as "my Dear" in line 7. The speaker's tender description of herself as his "friend" (after having noted only a few lines earlier how easily death separates "friends so dear and sweet") underscores the tragedy at the heart of the poem. If the speaker dies in

childbirth, her earthly suffering will be over—but her family's will have just begun.

Despite the speaker's acknowledgement of her vulnerability as a pregnant woman, these lines maintain a calm, clear-eyed perspective on death. Take a look at how alliteration and assonance give this rhyming couplet a steady, measured feel:

> How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,
> How soon't may be thy Lot to lose thy friend,

Here, paired /d/, /m/, and /l/ alliteration in "Dear"/"death," "may"/"my," and "Lot/lose" makes these lines feel balanced, while /oo/ and /eh/ assonance keep the poem's sounds harmonious. This speaker is so composed in the face of death that she can still make music with her language.

LINES 9-12

> *We are both ignorant, yet love bids me*
> *These farewell lines to recommend to thee,*
> *That when that knot's untied that made us one,*
> *I may seem thine, who in effect am none.*

In these lines, the speaker explains why she's writing this very poem. Though her fate in childbirth remains uncertain, she feels compelled by her love for her husband to write him "these farewell lines," just in case she *does* die.

Rather than explicitly refer to her potential death, however, the speaker uses a metaphor: "when that knot's untied that made us one." In this image, marriage is a tight knot that binds two separate strands together. And this relationship is so important and fundamental to the speaker that she knows only death can "untie[]" it. This metaphor builds on the figurative language of lines 3 and 4, when the speaker referred to life's earthly joys as "ties" that can be severed by "death's parting blow."

This moment in the poem also reveals that the speaker and her husband share a partnership so close that it "made [them] one." No wonder, then, that the speaker's "love bids [her]" to write this poem. As she explains in lines 10-12, she hopes that this poem will "recommend" her to her husband, so that even after death "I may [still] seem thine." In other words, the speaker hopes this poem will remind her husband that she will always be his, even in death—and that her words will encourage him to go on loving her.

These lines establish the poem's twin goals: saying goodbye, just in case, and issuing firm instructions about how exactly the speaker wants her husband to remember her. The rest of the poem will focus on these two ideas.

LINES 13-18

> *And if I see not half my dayes that's due,*
> *What nature would, God grant to yours and you;*
> *The many faults that well you know I have*
> *Let be interr'd in my oblivious grave;*
> *If any worth or virtue were in me,*
> *Let that live freshly in thy memory*

In these lines, the speaker begins instructing her husband on how to cope in the event of her death.

She starts out by hoping that, if she does die young, "God [will] grant to yours and you"—her husband and children—the balance of the days she *should* have had on earth. Once again, the speaker demonstrates a remarkable composure in the face of death. Though her reference to "my dayes that's due" reveals her genuine love for life, she's nevertheless able to accept that she may not receive the full life that she feels she is owed, and generously prays that God will bestow those days on her family instead.

In line 15, the speaker gets practical, leaving her husband the first of many instructions on how he should remember her if she dies. Notice the parallel structure here:

> The many faults that well you know I have
> Let be interr'd in my oblivious grave;
> If any worth or virtue were in me,
> Let that live freshly in thy memory

In these balanced, matching lines, the speaker asks her husband to forget her faults, and remember her virtues, introducing some of the poem's big ideas: remembrance and legacy. Seemingly comfortable with the fact that she may die, the speaker is nevertheless concerned with how she will be remembered after her death.

She emphasizes her concern by personifying her "oblivious grave," imagining the grave as itself forgetful, a thing that can consign the dead to "oblivion." (Of course, it's also a convenient place to bury one's "faults" forever!) It's all too easy for the living to forget the dead, this image suggests—and the speaker wants her husband to be sure to keep the good parts of her alive in his memory.

LINES 19-24

> *And when thou feel'st no grief, as I no harms,*
> *Yet love thy dead, who long lay in thine arms.*
> *And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains*
> *Look to my little babes, my dear remains.*
> *And if thou love thyself, or loved'st me,*
> *These o protect from step Dames injury.*

The speaker's continued instructions to her husband reveal her concern over her legacy.

She starts out by reminding her husband of their love for one another, even hinting at their sexual relationship when she recalls how "long [she] lay in [his] arms." Nevertheless, the speaker acknowledges that with time her husband will "feel[] no grief" and his "loss shall be repaid with gains": in other words, that he will eventually move on and remarry.

When that happens, the speaker says, her husband had better "Look to my little babes, my dear remains. / And [...] protect" them from any harm a stepmother might inflict on them. The metaphor of the children as the speaker's "dear remains" suggest that they're literally her own flesh and blood, parts of her body. Here, the speaker makes clear that she sees her memory as more than an abstract thing. It is also the physical "remains" that she leaves behind in the form of her children.

And she's concerned that those "remains" don't suffer! Here, she's warning against a danger so ancient it turns up in fairy tales: the threat of the "wicked stepmother," a second wife who's neglectful at best and murderous at worst. If you've got to remarry, the speaker warns her husband, you better not let your next wife behave how second wives proverbially behave...

The use of diacope in line 23 emphasizes how urgently this matters to the speaker. The close repetition of the word "love" serves as a reminder of the connection between the speaker and her husband, but she also leverages that connection almost as a threat, warning him that if he *really* "love[s himself] or love'dst [her]," then he must follow her wishes and look after their children.

LINES 25-28

And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,
With some sad sighs honour my absent Herse;
And kiss this paper for thy loves dear sake,
Who with salt tears this last Farewel did take.

At the end of the poem, the speaker's concern with her legacy turns from her living "remains," her children, to her artistic remains: her poetry, including the very poem she's writing now.

As she did once before in line 10, here the speaker directly mentions the poem that her husband—and readers—are reading:

> And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,
> With some sad sighs honour my absent Herse;
> And kiss this paper for thy loves dear sake,

Though she describes the possibility of her husband rereading this poem as a matter of "chance," the speaker's request that he "honour" her with "sad sighs" and even "kiss this paper" all suggest that she hopes he will treasure this poem. The speaker sees the poem as a key part of her memory, as important to her legacy on earth as her children or her family's memories of her. This last instruction reveals the speaker's understanding (and desire) that the words she leaves behind will also keep her "alive" in the world—even after her death. And so far, she's been proven right: after all, you're reading this poem even now!

The speaker has been stoic through much of the poem, but in the final lines, readers get a glimpse of her deep sorrow at the prospect of her death. Listen to the soft sibilance in lines 27-28:

> And kiss this paper for thy loves dear sake,
> Who with salt tears this last Farewel did take.

Those gentle repeated /s/ sounds resemble the "sad sighs" of mourning that the speaker describes. In the very last line, the speaker even reveals that she has been shedding "salt tears" as she writes "this last Farewel."

This closing emphasis on personal grief reminds readers of how much the joys of life on earth—marriage, motherhood, and even poetry—really matter to the speaker. Though the poem has been preoccupied with death, the poem's final image of its weeping speaker (and author) captures the importance of birth, reminding readers that to mourn life is to celebrate its value, too.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration lends musicality and consistency to the poem's already-regular meter and rhyme scheme. Steady, predictable, cohesive sounds reflect the poem's subject matter: the inevitability of death.

In the poem's early lines, for instance, alliterative /w/ and /a/ sounds reinforce the speaker's focus on death as an unavoidable aspect of life:

> All things within this fading world hath end,
> Adversity doth still our joyes attend;

The repetition of the /w/ sounds in "within" and "world" links the mortality of living things with the fleeting world they live in. And the repetition of the /a/ sound in "Adversity" and "attend" literally "attends," or waits, to return just a few words later, mirroring the way that hardship follows every joy.

Later in the poem, lilting /l/ alliteration evokes the speaker's sorrow as she imagines her family's fate after her death:

> And when thou feel'st no grief, as I no harms,
> Yet love thy dead, who long lay in thine arms.
> And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains
> Look to my little babes, my dear remains.

These gentle, meditative /l/ sounds suggest the speaker's tenderness toward her family—and the sorrow she feels at even imagining their future life without her.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "within," "world"
- **Line 2:** "Adversity," "attend"
- **Line 3:** "dear"

- **Line 4:** "death's"
- **Line 5:** "irrevocable"
- **Line 6:** "inevitable"
- **Line 7:** "Dear," "death," "may my"
- **Line 8:** "Lot," "lose"
- **Line 13:** "dayes," "due"
- **Line 14:** "God grant," "yours," "you"
- **Line 17:** "worth," "were"
- **Line 18:** "Let," "live"
- **Line 20:** "love," "long lay"
- **Line 21:** "loss"
- **Line 22:** "Look," "little"
- **Line 26:** "some sad sighs"
- **Line 27:** "sake"
- **Line 28:** "salt"

ALLUSION

Allusions to the poet's (and speaker's) religious worldview shape this poem. The speaker's unflinching acceptance of her own mortality reflects her deep Puritan faith.

The Puritans believed in predestination, or the idea that God had already chosen which people were destined for heaven and hell. This belief pops up in the poem in the form of a religious allusion in line 5: "The sentence past is most irrevocable."

The "sentence," or judgment, to which the speaker refers is one that God has already "past" (or passed, in contemporary spelling). This line can be read as a reference to the mortality of all living things. But within a Puritan context, the use of the word "sentence" to describe this fate alludes to something harsher: the judgement of God, which awaits each person upon their death.

In the context of the poem's discussion of childbirth, the "sentence [passed]" by God may also allude to another belief deeply embedded in the Puritan faith: labor pains as a punishment for women's original sin. Many Puritans (and other Christians of the era) believed women were doomed to suffer during childbirth as a punishment for Eve's decision to eat forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This biblical story was a foundational aspect of the Puritan belief that all humans were sinners, subject to God's "sentence."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "The sentence past is most irrevocable, / A common thing, yet oh inevitable."

ASSONANCE

Assonance, like alliteration, makes the poem sound musical and cohesive. But it also strengthens the poem's emotion and meaning.

For instance, in line 7, the /eh/ assonance of "Death may my steps attend" evokes just how closely Death might follow in the speaker's footsteps. And in line 22, the long /a/ assonance in "Look to my little babes, my dear remains" strengthens this vivid image, emphasizing that the speaker's children feel, to her, like parts of her own body.

For more on how sound devices like this work, see the Poetic Devices entry on "alliteration."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "dear," "sweet"
- **Line 5:** "sentence," "irrevocable"
- **Line 7:** "steps," "attend"
- **Line 8:** "soon't," "lose"
- **Line 9:** "We," "me"
- **Line 12:** "I," "thine"
- **Line 17:** "worth," "virtue"
- **Line 18:** "freshly," "memory"
- **Line 19:** "feel'st," "grief"
- **Line 21:** "repaid," "gains"
- **Line 22:** "babes," "remains"
- **Line 24:** "o," "protect"
- **Line 25:** "thine," "eyes"
- **Line 26:** "sighs"
- **Line 27:** "paper," "sake"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration and assonance, consonance gives the poem musicality, rhythm, and meaning. In particular, the poem relies heavily on consonant /d/ and /t/ sounds, which reflect the poem's weighty subject matter. The heavy /d/ sounds that repeat in the first few lines, in words like "world," "end," "friends," "dear," and "death," create a somber tone.

And look at all the /t/ sounds in lines 8-12:

> How soon't may be thy Lot to lose thy friend,
> We are both ignorant, yet love bids me
> These farewell lines to recommend to thee,
> That when that knot's untied that made us one,
> I may seem thine, who in effect am none.

Those sharp /t/s hint at the fear and grief the speaker feels (and masks with her calm instructions) as she contemplates her own death.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "within," "world," "end"
- **Line 2:** "attend"
- **Line 3:** "ties," "friends," "dear," "sweet"
- **Line 4:** "death's," "meet"
- **Line 5:** "sentence," "past," "irrevocable"

- **Line 6:** “inevitable”
- **Line 7:** “How soon,” “Dear,” “death,” “may my,” “attend”
- **Line 8:** “How soon’t,” “Lot,” “friend”
- **Line 9:** “ignorant,” “bids”
- **Line 10:** “lines,” “recommend”
- **Line 11:** “knot’s,” “untied”
- **Line 12:** “effect”
- **Line 13:** “if,” “half,” “dayes,” “due”
- **Line 14:** “would,” “God,” “grant,” “yours,” “you”
- **Line 15:** “faults”
- **Line 16:** “Let,” “interr’d,” “oblivious,” “grave”
- **Line 17:** “worth,” “virtue,” “were”
- **Line 18:** “Let,” “live,” “memory”
- **Line 19:** “feel’st,” “grief”
- **Line 20:** “love,” “dead,” “long lay”
- **Line 21:** “loss,” “repaid,” “gains”
- **Line 22:** “Look,” “little,” “dear,” “remains”
- **Line 23:** “love,” “loved’st”
- **Line 24:** “protect,” “Dames”
- **Line 25:** “chance,” “verse”
- **Line 26:** “some,” “sad sighs,” “Herse”
- **Line 27:** “kiss,” “sake”
- **Line 28:** “salt,” “tears,” “take”

REPETITION

Toward the end of "Before the Birth of One of Her Children," the speaker repeats one word over and over: "love." Her diacope on this one word (and her polyptoton when she changes it to "loved'st" in line 23) reflect the intensity of her feeling at the poem's climax.

But that feeling isn't all hearts and rainbows. In line 23, for instance, the speaker uses repetition to issue a threat, warning her husband that if his "love" for her is truly as strong as he says, then he'd better protect their children from the cruelty of their hypothetical future stepmother. It's a paradoxical use of the device, emphasizing the power of the love between the speaker and her husband even as she uses that love to extract a promise from him.

Her use of "love" is a little gentler in lines 20 and 27, where she merely asks her husband to "love thy dead" and to "kiss this paper for thy loves dear sake." Given that few other words repeat in the poem, the repetition of the word "love" builds the poem's power and persuasive weight—and brings home the depth of the speaker's feeling.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** “love”
- **Line 23:** “love,” “loved’st”
- **Line 27:** “loves”

ENJAMBMENT

For the most part, "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" relies on end-stopped lines, using punctuation like commas and semicolons to give the poem its steady pace. However, there are two moments of enjambment in the poem, bridging lines 9-10 and 15-16:

> We are both ignorant, yet love bids me
> These farewell lines to recommend to thee,
> [...]
> The many faults that well you know I have
> Let be interr’d in my oblivious grave;

In lines 9-10, the enjambment appears in the middle of the speaker's revelation that she is penning *this very poem* as a farewell in case she dies in childbirth. In lines 15-16, meanwhile, the enjambment appears in the middle of the speaker's request that her husband metaphorically "bury," or forget, her "many faults." In both of these cases, enjambment speeds up the rhythm of the poem, propelling readers onto the next line.

But the enjambment also enhances the *emotion* of each line, highlighting the intensity of the speaker's thoughts and feelings as she grapples with her possible death and the legacy she will leave behind. It's as if these painful thoughts sweep her verse along faster.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** “me / These”
- **Lines 15-16:** “have / Let”

METAPHOR

Metaphors are scattered throughout "Before the Birth of One of Her Children," elevating the poem's plainspoken language and deepening the speaker's meditations on life and death.

For instance, when the speaker refers to her children as her "dear remains," the metaphor captures the way the speaker sees her children as a vital, tangible part of the legacy she will leave behind. It's as if they're parts of her own body.

The poem often puts metaphors in a row, producing a one-two punch of powerful images. For instance, line 3 metaphorically refers to the pleasures of friends and family as "ties so strong," as if they're strings that literally bind the speaker to life. Line 4 swiftly follows that metaphor with another one: "death's parting blow," falling like an axe. On their own, both metaphors would be expressive; together, they are deeply moving, the connection of "ties so strong" metaphorically severed by the "parting blow" of death. A few lines later, this metaphor reappears when the speaker refers to her marriage as a "knot," one about to "untied" by her potential death.

Metaphor makes an already poignant poem even more moving, helping the speaker express her bittersweet reflections on life and death.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "No ties so strong"
- **Line 4:** "death's parting blow"
- **Line 5:** "The sentence past"
- **Line 7:** "death may my steps attend"
- **Line 11:** "that knot's untied that made us one"
- **Line 13:** "see not half my dayes"
- **Line 21:** "when thy loss shall be repaid with gains"
- **Line 22:** "my dear remains."
- **Line 26:** "my absent Herse"

PARALLELISM

Parallelism is one of the most significant poetic devices in "Before the Birth of One of Her Children." It creates a sense of urgency and conveys the speaker's fervent emotion as she considers the possibility of dying in childbirth.

Parallelism first appears in lines 7 and 8, when the speaker repeats the phrase "How soon" in quick succession, at the opening of each line. This is a pivotal turning point in the poem, marking the moment when the speaker shifts from thinking about death as a universal fact of life to thinking specifically about "how soon" she herself may die. The parallel sentence structure of these two lines not only creates rhythm, but drives home the magnitude of the speaker's realization that death "may [her] steps attend," awaiting her in just a matter of months, weeks, or days.

A few lines later, the speaker's focus shifts again, as she begins issuing instructions for her husband on how to cope with her potential loss. Many of these lines share a parallel structure, opening with the words "And if" or "And when." As the speaker toggles between these two different states—the uncertain future and the certainty of eventual death—the urgency of her requests, all of them concerned with protecting her memory and legacy, increases. The repetition of these phrases gives readers a sense of the speaker's mounting grief, even in moments when she accepts the fact of her own death.

Lines 16 and 18 also share a parallel structure, opening with the word "Let." These follow the less certain "And if" lines, emphasizing that while the speaker is not sure whether or not she will die, she is very sure how she wants her husband to proceed if she does.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend, / How soon't may be thy Lot to lose thy friend,"
- **Line 13:** "And if I see not half my dayes that's due,"
- **Line 16:** "Let be interr'd in my oblivious grave;"
- **Line 18:** "Let that live freshly in thy memory"
- **Line 19:** "And when thou feel'st no grief, as I no harms,"
- **Line 21:** "And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains"
- **Line 23:** "And if thou love thyself, or loved'st me,"
- **Line 25:** "And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,"

VOCABULARY

Hath (Line 1) - An old-fashioned form of "have."

Doth (Line 2) - An old-fashioned form of "do."

Joyes (Line 2) - An old-fashioned spelling of "joys."

Attend (Line 2, Line 7) - To wait for, or be in store for.

Irrevocable (Line 5) - Unchangeable, permanent.

Thy (Line 8, Line 18, Line 20, Line 21, Line 23, Line 27) - An old-fashioned form of "your."

Lot (Line 8) - A person's fortune or fate—as in their "lot in life."

Thee (Line 10) - An old-fashioned form of "you."

Thine (Line 12, Line 20) - An archaic form of "yours" or "your."

Dayes (Line 13) - An old-fashioned spelling of "days."

Interr'd (Line 16) - An abbreviated spelling of "interred," or buried.

Oblivious (Line 16) - Lacking remembrance or memory—with the implication that the grave itself makes the dead person "forget" the pains of life, and might make their mourners "forget" their bad qualities, too.

Step Dames (Line 24) - Stepmother's.

Herse (Line 26) - An old-fashioned spelling of "hearse." In Bradstreet's time, this word might refer not only to the vehicle that carries a coffin, but to the coffin itself.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Before the Birth of One of Her Children" is an epistolary poem, which means it is a poem that directly addresses a specific audience—in this case, the speaker's husband. This gives the poem a deeply personal tone.

Composed of a single 28-line stanza, the poem is written in heroic couplets: pairs of rhyming lines that follow strict iambic pentameter. (More on that in the Meter and Rhyme Scheme sections.) Together, this orderly rhyme scheme and metrical pattern follow the conventions of 17th-century British poetry, the tradition in which poet Anne Bradstreet was educated.

However, the poem is less formal than many of its contemporaries in one important way: its plainspoken language. Though many of the words and phrases sound old-fashioned to today's ears, "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" was in fact a very un-flowery, un-showy poem for its time. It uses straightforward language that reflects how the poet likely spoke out loud. This conversational sound gives the poem an intimate, tender feeling, making the subject matter—the possibility of the speaker's death in childbirth—all the more poignant.

METER

"Before the Birth of One of Her Children" uses iambic pentameter, a meter with five iambs—poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm—per line.

The poem follows this pattern quite strictly, though readers should note it does rely on Bradstreet's British pronunciation (such as a three-syllable pronunciation of oblivious, i.e., *oh-bliv-yuss*) in order to do so:

> And if | I see | not half | my dayes | that's due,
> What na- | ture would, | God grant | to yours | and you;
> The ma- | ny faults | that well | you know | I have
> Let be | in-terr'd | in my | o-bliv- | ious grave;
> If a- | ny worth | or vir- | tue were | in me,
> Let that | live fresh- | ly in | thy mem- | ory

Iambic pentameter has a long history in British poetry, and can be found in works by writers from William Shakespeare to John Donne to Alexander Pope. By using iambic pentameter, Bradstreet places her work in a significant literary tradition and gives the poem a serious, weighty tone.

Her use of this traditional and celebrated meter acknowledges the seriousness of the poem's subject matter (the possibility of death in childbirth). But it also elevates subjects—childbirth, motherhood, marriage, and women's lives overall—that were, in Bradstreet's time, not usually considered important enough for poetic attention.

RHYME SCHEME

"Before the Birth of One of Her Children" is made up of 28 lines, all of them rhyming couplets, like this:

AABBCC

Each of these rhyming couplets is also considered a heroic couplet—a couplet that uses strict iambic pentameter. (See the "Meter" section for more on that.)

Heroic couplets are the bedrock of British literary classics like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. By using them here, Bradstreet links herself and this poem to a longstanding literary tradition.

What's more, heroic couplets—as the name implies—are traditionally associated with works of epic or narrative poetry, works that usually feature heroes (like Virgil's Aeneas) or larger-than-life people in extraordinary situations (like Chaucer's pilgrims).

At first glance, "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" could not be more different from these grand poems. But with her heroic couplets, Bradstreet implicitly compares the trials and tribulations of pregnant mothers in the 17th century to the plights of ancient heroes or medieval pilgrims. The use of the heroic couplet here suggests that to risk death with the birth of every child is every bit as brave and formidable as founding an empire or going on a pilgrimage.

The heroic couplets in "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" don't just provide a consistent rhyme scheme that situates the poem within the literary conventions of its day: they let the poem and the poet break new literary ground.

SPEAKER

The first-person speaker of "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" is a pregnant woman, a wife, a mother, and a poet.

Each of these aspects of her identity is revealed in different parts of the poem, beginning with the title, which announces that the speaker is awaiting the birth of a child. Later, line 22 makes it that this is not the speaker's first child, but one of several "little babes."

The speaker often directly addresses her husband; she also uses metaphors for their love (the "knot [...] that made us one") that confirm they are indeed married. Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker refers to "this verse" and begs her husband to "kiss this paper," affirming that the speaker is not only a poet but the author of this very work.

Many readers interpret the speaker as Anne Bradstreet herself, given their similarities and the poem's self-referential ending. Bradstreet was also a wife, mother, and poet; readers may assume that the speaker of the poem shares other aspects of Bradstreet's identity as well. For example, the speaker's references to God and stoicism in the face of death suggest that, like Bradstreet, she's a Puritan living in 17th-century New England.

SETTING

The setting of "Before the Birth of One of Her Children" is likely the setting in which the poet Anne Bradstreet lived, wrote, and gave birth to eight children: 17th-century colonial New England. The speaker of the poem and the poet have a lot in common—including a high risk of death in childbirth. It is thus quite likely they share the same physical setting, as well.

However, the poem itself is mostly concerned with the inner life, tracing the thoughts and emotions of the pregnant mother at its center. Apart from its impact on her ability to safely deliver a baby, the external setting of the poem is less important than the speaker's internal landscape. The poem charts her thought process as she grapples with death, and prepares her family for that sad possibility.

The speaker's concern with her legacy and memory also extends the poem's setting to include time itself, as she makes plans in an uncertain present for a potential future—one in which she no longer lives.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Anne Bradstreet was the first writer—and the first woman—in colonial America to write and publish a book of poems. Her first volume, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, was printed in 1650, and met with acclaim in both England and its colonies.

Writing poetry, to say nothing of publishing it, was an extremely unusual activity for women at the time. In fact, Bradstreet's brother-in-law wrote a preface for the book to assure readers that the author, "a Woman, honored and esteemed where she lives," had not neglected her domestic duties to write these verses. This preface even implied that Bradstreet had not known that her book was going to be published, though this wasn't true!

"Before the Birth of One of Her Children" didn't appear in that first collection, but was published after Bradstreet's death in 1678, in a volume of her collected works titled *Several Poems Compiled with Great Variety of Wit and Learning*. This collection, rooted in Bradstreet's lived experience as a woman and a Puritan, is confident, expressive, deeply personal, and daring. While Bradstreet was educated in the old traditions of English poetry, her interest in everyday life separates her from dreamier, flightier, bawdier English contemporaries like Andrew Marvell and Robert Herrick.

Though she was not the only New England poet of her day, Bradstreet has outlasted the others, all of whom were men. Her unique attention to the intimacies and challenges of women's lives in colonial America is the bedrock of her legacy—the very legacy she hopes for in this poem.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Anne Bradstreet was born in England in the early 17th century to a wealthy Puritan family, and was unusually well-educated for a woman of her time. She was married at 16, and in 1630, she and her family migrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. (Both Bradstreet's husband and her father eventually served as governors there.) Their emigration was driven by their religious views: the Bradstreets were devout Puritans, a radical Protestant sect that was persecuted in England and left for America to practice their religion freely.

Life in the Massachusetts Bay Colony was strict. This Puritans practiced a faith obsessed with sin, salvation, obedience, and dedication to God—and their society was structured and controlled by male political and religious figures. As a writer and published poet, Bradstreet occupied an unusual position, expressing her individuality in a culture that was generally hostile to personal autonomy and only valued religious art. The fact that she was a woman publishing poetry, in a society that often found women's voices threatening, made her position still more fraught and unique. (Some women who challenged the colony's leaders, such as Anne Hutchinson, were exiled.)

This poem also treats another danger of women's lives in that time and place: childbirth. Before a modern understanding of germs and sanitation, maternal mortality rate in the colonies was shockingly high—and so was the birth rate! Though every new baby might mean death, Bradstreet became the mother of eight.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Anne Bradstreet's Biography — Read about the poet's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-bradstreet)
- Women in Puritan Society — Explore a study guide about the roles and rights of Puritan women. (https://study.com/academy/lesson/women-in-puritan-society-roles-rights.html#:~:text=Women%20in%20Puritan%20society%20
- America's First Poet — Listen to an NPR piece about the life and work of Anne Bradstreet. (https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4616663)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poet Robert Pinsky reading the poem aloud. (https://youtu.be/lBFNdjV_WOo)
- Childbirth in Early America — Read a history of childbirth in colonial America. (https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/topic_display.cfm?tcid=70#:~:text=In%20colonial%20America%

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ANNE BRADSTREET POEMS

- The Author to Her Book
- To My Dear and Loving Husband

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Malordy, Jessica. "*Before the Birth of One of Her Children*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 4 Nov 2020. Web. 26 Jan 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Malordy, Jessica. "*Before the Birth of One of Her Children*." LitCharts LLC, November 4, 2020. Retrieved January 26, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/anne-bradstreet/before-the-birth-of-one-of-her-children.