

# 2015 MCC Creative Writing Contest

## Essay Category

**First Place (tie):** “*Sexism’s Effect on Anne Bradstreet’s Perspective,*” by Amber Dimond

Anne Bradstreet rose above incredible odds and became a successful female author in the 1600s. Her writing was impressive enough that she was actually able to see her own rise as a writer, unlike many artists whose contributions were only recognized after their deaths. However, becoming an accomplished female author was not without its obstacles. And living as one presented yet more challenges. This atmosphere unavoidably affected how Anne viewed and expressed herself as a writer. However, she possessed the fortitude to, not only continue in this male-dominated field, but to encourage progress through her art. This ability to turn criticism into inspiration remains a valuable and timeless example of perseverance, for men and women alike.

Anne Bradstreet’s experience of living as female writer in the 17th century is reflected in her poetry, which frequently comments on the gender politics of her day. In verse 5 of “The Prologue” she says that she is obnoxious to those who think she is better suited to sewing. The same verse goes on to say that even if her work proves she is a competent writer, the fact that she is a woman will hinder her advancement. When faced with skillful writing produced by “female wits,” her critics will simply attribute it to theft or “chance.” It’s unsurprising that in “The Author to Her Book,” she warns her flawed child (a metaphor describing her writing) about the danger of falling into “critic’s hands.”

Another element of her writing that provides insight into Bradstreet’s reality is her use of self-deprecation. In verse 3 of “The Prologue,” she says that, “From schoolboy’s tongue no rhet’ric we expect/Nor yet a sweet consort from broken strings, /Nor perfect beauty where’s a main defect.” She effectively tells the reader that they should not expect any more from her than they would expect rhetoric from a child, beautiful music from broken strings, or perfect beauty from something that is innately flawed.

Furthermore, her many accomplishments were seemingly insufficient to quell the feeling that she was incapable of making truly valuable contributions. She continues in verse 3 to say that art was unable to mend her natural flaws, “Cause nature made it so irreparable.” The same thought is carried into the next verse. While she felt that art was powerful enough to help the Greek orator Demosthenes overcome a speech defect, she also concluded that even this powerful force was incapable of curing her “weak or wounded brain.” These expressions of inferiority were directly tied to her gender. In verse 7, she says that men have precedence, preeminence, and the natural ability to “do best.”

Do these lines show that she shared her critics’ opinion that women were inferior to men? Do they show that she believed they were less capable artists? Additional context paints a much more complex picture.

For instance, she occasionally touches on the fact that women were simply not given the opportunities or resources that they needed to fully express their potential. After saying that men have precedence in verse 7 of “The Prologue,” she also insists that they should still grant

women “some small acknowledgment” of their abilities. If women’s underrepresentation in intellectual pursuits were purely because of their own inferior abilities, there would be no use in asking men to grant them more opportunities; they would be incapable of taking advantage of them. Clearly, she recognized that the patriarchal society was, to some extent, withholding privileges that women deserved.

The same sentiment is also hinted at in “The Author to Her Book,” where she compares her writing to a blemished, defective child. When she attempts to ameliorate her child’s condition with better clothing, she finds “naught save homespun cloth” in her house. While this could be a reflection on how she viewed the shortcomings of her own talent, it could also be a comment on the fact that women were not given the same resources as men. Their education, expectations, and opportunities were vastly different and mostly inferior. The “house” or society that she lived in simply didn’t provide anything more than “homespun cloth” for her to work with.

Other examples of her poetry give the reader a glimpse into what Bradstreet believed women were capable of if given the opportunities they deserved. Her expressions about Queen Elizabeth I are an excellent case in point. In “The Poem,” she says that Elizabeth “wiped off the’ aspersion of her sex, / That women wisdom lack to play the rex.” Bradstreet alleged that claims about women’s inferiority were an “aspersion” and that Queen Elizabeth’s rule was proof. She depicts the queen as mighty monarch and warrior who eluded restrictive gender norms, calling her a “virago” and an “Amazon.” She hails instances where Elizabeth surpassed or conquered male monarchs. She favorably compares her to a string of historical female rulers, such as Semiramis, Tomyris, and Cleopatra.

In lines 77 and 78 she brings up that there are those who still wonder if women have merit, or if perhaps the only female merit died with Queen Elizabeth. She gives her reply in lines 81 and 82 where she states, “Let such as say our sex is void of reason, / Know ’tis a slander now but once was treason.” Bradstreet felt that even with the queen gone, such sentiments were so untruthful that they constituted slander.

Taken as a whole, Anne Bradstreet’s poetry could appear to be a contradiction. On one hand, she presents herself as a self-effacing individual who doubts her talents, views men as superior and asks that the reader not expect too much from her as a woman. On the other hand, she calls similar derogatory ideas slander, asserts that women are deprived of recognition and opportunities, and that they’re fully capable of outperforming men. How can these dichotomous viewpoints be reconciled?

First of all, with the context of Anne Bradstreet’s high regard for women, we see much of what appeared to be pure self-deprecation transform into irony. Going back to “The Prologue,” she states, “To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings, / Of cities, founded commonwealths begun, / For my mean pen are too superior things.” She adds that she will leave the discussion of such important topics to poets and historians and that her “obscure lines shall not so dim their worth.” She carries the theme of her creative weakness throughout the rest of the poem, eventually tying it to her gender.

However, it is apparent from Bradstreet’s other work that that is not the view she held of herself, at least not the complete view. Her poems about Queen Elizabeth I show that she is confident enough to write at length about someone whom she considered to be among history’s greatest monarchs. These same poems include extensive references to subjects such as wars, kings, and the founding of cities. Clearly, she wasn’t actually content to leave these topics to the historians.

Obviously, depreciating herself and her sex was not the goal of “The Prologue.” Instead, this poem shows the nonsensicality of sexism. The author ostensibly accepts the stereotypes of women being incapable of intellectual pursuits, while simultaneously refuting them with her literary skill. This irony draws attention to the injustice committed against women by underestimating them.

Another possible motive for Anne Bradstreet to minimize her own contributions (and those of women in general) was to make her message more palatable to a male audience. Many would be threatened or offended by the obvious success and talent of a woman. For her to unquestioningly acknowledge her own considerable abilities would have been to risk appearing immodest, indecorous, and off-putting. Her entreaties for progress, such as asking men to “grant some small acknowledgment” of women’s strengths, would have been dismissed out of hand. However, approaching the subject as a humble woman, aware of her own deficiencies and supportive of male dominance, she may have done more to propel the advancement she hoped for.

Lastly, much of any writer’s apparent contradictions can be explained by the fact that they are human, and Anne Bradstreet is no exception. Often, the frustrations she expresses about her own abilities read as genuine. In “The Author to Her Book,” she describes her work as “unfit for light.” She saw it as an “ill-formed offspring” whose blemishes she couldn’t amend. She writes, “I washed thy face, but more defects I saw, / And rubbing off a spot still made a flaw.” These sentiments echo the difficulties that countless authors have faced: a fear of publishing, relentless editing, and unattainable standards. Additionally, it would be all but impossible to completely avoid internalizing the commonly held beliefs around her. If an entire society told her that she, as a woman, was unqualified to write, it would be hard to evade any insecurities on the topic. If her writing vacillates between confidence and doubt, it could be because she occasionally did too.

There have undoubtedly been many women throughout history whose brilliance never made it into the history books due to the same factors that plagued Anne Bradstreet and have endured into our day. The fact that she was able to achieve the abiding success that she did is a testament to her skill and strength as an author and a woman. She employed every instrument she had at her disposal, including irony, modesty, humanity, and pure talent, to convey her viewpoints, which were often complicated. Many thought her gender prohibited her from excellence. To those, perhaps Bradstreet herself provides the best response in “The Poem,” which states, “She’s argument enough to make you mute.”

## JUDGE’S COMMENTS

The essay exhibits the kind of close reading and thoughtfulness that marks a true student of literature. The discussion of aspects such as Bradstreet’s use of irony take the analysis beyond the obvious. The essay would be available to more readers if each poem discussed were summarized briefly before the analysis. Keep reading and writing!

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