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Sample Paper 5

English 320

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Reaction to Infant Mortality in a Puritanical Society

The startling rampancy of infant mortality was an epidemic that plagued families of 17th century New England. The reality of death unceasingly tormented Puritan families, thus demanding an unequivocal amount of faith in their religion. Consequently, they became consumed by their committed belief in an afterlife. This conviction granted them the peace to appreciate life's blessings and trials. They trusted God's plan and lived for the promise of expected treasures. After reading Mary Rowlandson and John Williams' texts in class, I began to question their seemingly calm acceptance of the death of their children. I was unable to comprehend the notion of embodying this spirit of tranquility following the death of my child. Their calm disposition in response to the death of their children led me to inquire further into the Puritan reaction to death. I chose to explore the emotional reactions to the phenomenon of infant mortality in early New England. In doing so, I found it imperative to recognize the cultural compliance regarding gender roles, religious intransigence, and suppression of worldly emotion.

Infant death was almost expected, either as a result of captivity or disease. Consequently, we may assume fear would be an overriding theme in Puritanical societies. Logically, it is possible to deduce that living with the persistent threat of death would translate to a fearful existence. In the *Representation of Childhood Death*, the authors discuss this by saying: "The Puritans in...New England...sought to cause fear and used very considerable eloquence to depict the appalling prospects in store for children who were not savingly converted" (Avery 88-89). Accordingly, instilling trepidation in children would be an effective method for teaching their truth that salvation is a more sanguine alternative after death. However, this inference is inaccurate. As a

less religious society, this may ultimately have been our reaction to high levels of infant mortality. Contrarily, in this time of tragedy the Puritans leaned on their faith as a source of strength more so than before. They made salvation a priority and attempted to callous themselves to the inescapable tragedy of death because they had nothing to fear. The peace that eased Puritan hearts was the hope of an afterlife, which seems to be the dominant reason behind my initial reaction to Rowlandson and Williams' compositions. After further reflection I came to the realization that they were not content with the deaths of their loved ones, but they were able to accept them by virtue of resounding faith.

The indistinguishable Puritan upbringing of colonial families was immeasurably influenced by the menacing likelihood of death. At first glance, it seems as though Puritans embodied a certain sense of accommodation toward the threat. Mary Rowlandson initially displayed this tone of detachment in her captivity narrative. She placed little importance on her emotional reaction to the tragedies she experienced. Rather, she focused on the inhumane treatment by the Indians, which she blamed for her child's death, then inconsequentially advanced to praising the Lord. In her accounts of *The Second and Third Remove* she wrote, "...with my sick Child in my armes, looking that every hour should be the last of its life; and having no Christian friend near me, either to comfort or help me...the Lord upheld me with his gracious and merciful Spirit...my Child being even ready to depart this sorrowful world...I sat down with the picture of death in my lap...There I left that Child in the Wilderness, and must commit it...to Him who is above all" (Rowlandson 446-448). Here the emerging postulation concerning her reaction is that she was moderately calloused to death due to Puritan standards. She was comforted by knowing her child was in heaven and escaped the suffering of this world. Rather than perceiving this as overwhelmingly emotional, she responded in a notably composed manner. In this culture it was

not abnormal to suppress true feelings of disappointment, as it could be misinterpreted as dissatisfaction with the execution of God's will. In principle, a Puritan was obliged to endure life's inherent trials, in the belief that every consequence, positive or negative, was a result of individual actions. Rowlandson attributed her tribulations to God's punishment for her shortcomings as a Puritan before captivity. Prior to her imprisonment she smoked tobacco and squandered the Sabbath Day, which she felt was the leading cause of the detrimental repercussions. It was widely believed that God's will was a direct result of their own actions and that He ultimately controlled the blessings and trials experienced in life.

Initially, Rowlandson revealed a relatively indifferent tone, but as her strength wearied she became increasingly disturbed. Despite my assumptions, she did eventually break down to reveal the inevitable human reaction of fear and discontent. Near the closing of *The Third Remove* she wrote, "...I earnestly entreated the Lord, that he would consider my low estate, and shew me a token for good, and if it were his blessed will, some sign and hope of some relief. And indeed quickly the Lord answered...for as I was...mourning and lamenting my condition, my Son came to me, and asked me how I did...I cannot but take notice of the wonderfull mercy of God..." (Rowlandson 448-449). She sustained her vigor and commitment to the Puritan ideal, while still admitting her sorrow. For a moment she revealed her emotional weakness after she lost three children, yet found redemption from her mourning through the deliverance of her son. By attributing this miracle to the Lord, she satisfied her culture's expectations and exemplified the epitome of an ideal Puritan woman. In doing so, she lucidly communicated that her primary purpose was to glorify God, not evoke sympathy or despondency for the losses she did suffer; primarily because they valued God's unfailing plan and understood death to be a fact of life that warranted minimal grief.

John Williams also offered an unexpectedly sentimental account of losing his children, only after suffering through multiple deaths. In his captivity narrative, *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion*, he acknowledged his pain with a heart of understanding. Like Rowlandson, Williams attributed the happenings of his life to the divine plan of God. After enduring the violent captivity by the natives, he maintained his faithful spirit by writing, "I begged of God to remember mercy in the midst of judgment... God beyond expectation made us in a great measure to be pitied, for though some were so cruel and barbarous as to take and carry to the door two of my children and murder them... they gave me liberty [and] gave liberty to my dear wife to dress herself and our children" (Williams 536). The extent of his religious devotion is displayed in this passive reaction. My initial impression was that he was detached from his children, which allowed him to maintain his thankful tone, in spite of the fact that two of his children were brutally murdered. He later revealed his wife's similar submission to Puritanical commitment, "My wife told me... I must expect to part with her, saying she hoped God would preserve some, if not all our children with us... She never spoke any discontented word... but with suitable expression justified God in what had befallen us" (Williams 537). The solace she found in her God's promise of an afterlife prevailed over any sense of fear she could have felt. As she humbly welcomed death, she cared more for the fate of her husband and children. Like a typical Puritan women, her sole objective was to raise righteous children and in her death bestowed that responsibility on her husband. This display of strength epitomized the unwavering conviction of women to fulfill expected roles of mothering.

Williams promised her he would sedulously care for them and raise them up in the Lord. Throughout the narrative he described various tragic experiences he persevered by virtue of God's grace. After his wife was viciously murdered he wrote, "My loss and the loss of my children was

great; our hearts were so filled with sorrow that nothing but the comfortable hopes of her being taken away in mercy...could have kept us from sinking under at that time" (Williams 538). God's grace empowered Williams with the strength to withstand these afflictions, granting him the ability to fulfill his promise to his wife. He was able to move forward and focus on the children who did survive. Rather than mourning their loss, he thanked God's mercy to take them in a time of tragedy. He felt secure in knowing his loved ones had reached a place of peace. Similarly to Rowlandson, he did reveal a moderately emotional reaction as death continually plagued his family. The absence of fear in their reactions displayed their assurance of an afterlife. These displays of faith changed my original assumption from detachment to the discovery of strength based on an unwavering conviction. However, because Williams' account was even less reactive, it led me to question whether this moderately tolerant reaction was truly influenced by religion alone or whether gender roles may have also contributed.

I began to research this point of inquiry further and discovered a compelling deduction regarding gender roles written in the early seventeenth century. Dorothy Leigh captured Puritanical maternal fervor of sustained spirituality in her text *The Mothers Blessing*. Her writings contributed to my belief that women were more narrowly focused on spiritual education than emotional attachment and that men were commonly emotionally unavailable. She outlined the important role of a mother in perpetuating the legacy of morally and spiritually virtuous offspring by urging all mothers to, "instruct it in the youth, and admonish it in age, and pray for it continually" (Brown 23). Raising children was primarily considered a mother's responsibility, as classical societies were injected with rigid prejudices toward women. Men were expected to sufficiently provide for their families, while women were responsible for keeping a good home and raising spiritually devout children. In her publication, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the*

Lives of Women in Northern New England, Laurel Ulrich examines the demanding role of women in New England by saying, "Three crucial factors determined the particular nature of the maternal role in early New England. Mothers represented the affectionate mode in an essentially authoritarian system of child-rearing. Mothering was extensive, rather than intensive. Motherhood was still closely keyed to the Puritan ideal of nurturing pious children" (Ulrich 153). Despite the compelling disposition of an unconditionally devoted connection, women were first obliged to nurture their children's physical needs in order that they may lead religiously rich lives and achieve spiritual salvation. Accordingly, mothering became a strenuous endeavor, rather than a rewarding journey. Instilling virtue became the central goal, overriding the manifestation of relationships. However little affection was shown would have come solely from a mother because men were not as available around the home. The hierarchical Puritan society required women to fulfill this cultural expectation, which made men less likely to become emotionally attached to their children. In part, men were unable to contribute to raising children due to the demanding responsibilities as a provider, but they also lacked the innate naturalized connection possessed by a mother and child.

I believe, in her text, Ulrich is only contributing to the perpetuation of common public presumptions. Her statements regarding mothering lead to the rash assumption that mothers represented a far more significant role in their children's lives than fathers. Men in our society have become notably more involved in the process of raising their children; thus it is natural to presuppose men in the seventeenth century would not be as affected by their children's death. On the contrary, men experienced dismal emotional reactions to the death of their children. Edward Taylor's poem "Upon Wedlock, and Death of Children" exemplifies this sense of despair. He

overtly detailed the juxtaposition of his excitement as a newlywed against the discouragement of his children's death. In lines 14-41, he described his reaction to the loss of his three children:

...Soon knotted, and a manly flower out brake.
But oh! a glorious hand from glory came.
Guarded with Angells, soon did Crop this flower.
Which almost tore the root up of the same.
In Pray're to Christ perfum'de it did ascend,
And Angells bright did it to heaven tend.
Christ would in Glory have a Flowre,
Lord, take't. I thanke thee, thou takst ought of mine,
It is my pledg in glory, part of mee.
Is now in it, Lord, glorifi'de with thee.
But praying ore my branch, my branch did sprout.
And bore another manly flower, and gay,
And after that another, sweet brake out,
The which the former hand soon got away.
But oh! the tortures, Vomit, screechings, groans,
And six weeks fever would pierce hearts like stones.
Griefe o're doth flow: and nature fault would finde.
I say, take, Lord, they're thine.

I joy, may I sweet Flowers for Glory breed... (Johnson 290)

Maintaining a fervent Puritan spirit, Taylor accepted the death of his children as a direct result of God's will. He praised the glorious gift of life and saw his underlying purpose as the procreation of more children so they may be brought up in the Lord. Accordingly, he willingly offered his offspring to the Lord and acknowledged they belonged to Him alone. Puritans understood their solitary duty as parents was to raise their children on the path of righteousness.

Contrary to contemporary belief, he further exposed his emotional reaction to the perceived theft of life. By referring to his children as flowers he ultimately conveys the powerful metaphor that a flower withers in its natural time, yet his children were taken in their pre-destined time. The difference is God took them in His chosen time, rather than at the ordained termination of the natural life cycle. Taylor vividly described the torturous anguish he felt after the loss of each child, rebuking Ulrich's declaration that women acted as the loving sector of the family unit.

Anne Bradstreet also exposed an emotional reaction after nurturing a strong bond between her and her grandchild. Despite Ulrich's claim that this affectionate relationship was unique to mothers, Bradstreet was also obligated to face youthful death and reacted similarly to a mother. Death may have been anticipated as a typical aspect of the cyclical nature of life; however, early American texts reveal this sense of reconciliation may not be as present as it appears on the surface. Despite the fervent faith in an afterlife, Bradstreet did not engage in the same level of acceptance displayed by Rowlandson and Williams. Bradstreet lost many family members that were far too young to die. In her poem "In Memory of My Dear Grandchild Elizabeth Bradstreet, Who Deceased August, 1665, Being a Year and Half Old", she began by accepting her grief, "... Farewell sweet babe, the pleasure of mine eye...Blest babe, why should I once bewail thy fate, Or sigh thy days so soon were terminate, Sith thou art settled inn an everlasting state" (Bradstreet 408). In these lines she revealed a spirit of peaceful reception to the primitive truth that death for the youth was a probable danger. Her words appear to have been written with a heart of tranquility that gracefully grieved the loss of her grandchild, in spite of her inescapable sorrow. However, her tone later changed in the second prose, which reads, "By nature trees do rot when they are grown...And time brings down what is both strong and tall. But plants new set to be eradicate, And buds new bloom to have so short a date, Is by His hands alone that guides nature and fate"

(Bradstreet 408). These last lines leave the lasting resonance that she could not comprehend the death of her grandchild. She argued that environmental aspects of nature follow a predestined cycle, and that that cycle should too be consistently applied to humans. Here she chooses to acknowledge the idea that God ultimately controls our fate, but does so with a defiant tone of disgruntlement. The difference between Bradstreet and previous authors was that she blatantly described her feelings of anger. Like any grandmother, she doesn't appreciate the workings of God's will if that means the death of a grandchild. It is unnatural for a grandmother to bury her grandchild, just as Taylor metaphorically stated it would be unnatural for freshly bloomed flowers to wither before their time.

Bradstreet's heart is by no means calloused by Puritanical ideals. She disapprovingly acknowledged her grandchild's death as ultimately controlled by God's will, rather than by nature's commandment. As death continued to rob her of her family's youth, she became gradually more affected and accordingly less passive toward the concept of death. She maintained her respectful tone in the lines: "With dreadful awe before Him let's be mute, Such was His will, but why, let's not dispute, With humble hearts and mouths put in the dust, Let's say He's merciful as well as just. He will return and make up all our losses" (Bradstreet 408). After suffering the death of her third relative to die young, her heart was less appeased by the committed veneration of religion. Rather, her heart grew notably weary in facing such tragedy. Bradstreet spoke much more loosely of her feelings, but refused to repudiate her conviction entirely. Though she may have conveyed her reaction with a stronger sense of anger, rather than the sadness of Taylor, she maintained an established level of respect. Thus, she ultimately paid homage to her Lord with the faith that He would repay her with abounding gifts in the future. Similarly to previous authors, her commitment lied in the trust that God would satisfy His virtue of mercy and justice.

Rowlandson, Williams, Bradstreet, and Taylor all share the comparable theme of graceful tolerance in the face of adversity. Their Puritan devotion was tested by the disappointment of death that took its toll as the demoralization continued. Though they each describe their reactions uniquely, they collectively became less accepting of infant mortality. As it reoccurred with higher frequency, they became notably affected, yet inadvertently maintained their spiritual fervor. The pervasive nature of Puritan thought established religion as an essential aspect of parenthood and literature. Throughout the evolution of the nation, parenting has exceeded the blatant boundary of a biological constant. Human nature calls us to be affected by morose circumstances, regardless of religious affliction or gender expectations.

Puritanical thought was by far the most influential factor in the cultural constructs of early colonial life. This domination is seen in early American literature as tensions rise in the dilemma to accept infant death as a part of God's plan. As a result of our cultural assumptions, my initial assessment led to the notion that Puritan fathers and mothers were calloused to the sorrow of losing a child. However, these texts subdue that impression, as they reveal the intrinsic human reaction of a parent faced with a loss. For Rowlandson, Williams, Taylor, and Bradstreet infant mortality was unanimously perceived as a tragedy worthy of limited indignation. The influence of Puritan thought is revealed in these texts through inhibited feelings, shadowed by the apologetic and thankful nature of a rigid ideology. Shockingly, understood gender roles, Puritanical obduracy, and emotional restraint did not hold nearly as much weight as I originally assumed. Rather, the inevitable transmission of innate parental bonds took precedence over vehement religious devotion. After a close communication with the text, I am led to believe these parents were not calloused, but faithful believers in God's covenant.

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