Upon the Burning of Our House

by Anne Bradstreet

LITERARY FOCUS: THE PLAIN STYLE

The Puritans favored “plainness” in all things: in dress, in the architecture and design of their churches, in their forms of worship, and in language. Unlike the ornate “high style” popular in England at the time, the Puritan plain style used simple sentences and common words from everyday speech. The plain style contained few or no classical allusions, Latin quotations, or elaborate figures of speech. The plain style, Puritans felt, was much more effective in revealing God’s truth than the ornate style. Despite the fact that the style used by Puritan writers now seems hard to read, it was considered simple and direct in the 1600s.

Although Anne Bradstreet’s “Upon the Burning of Our House” contains some figurative language, it is a good example of the plain style.

Make It Plain In the left column of the chart below are two descriptions of everyday objects written in an ornate style. Rewrite each description in plain style—as a Puritan might have.

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READING SKILLS: ANALYZING TEXT STRUCTURES

“Upon the Burning of Our House” is filled with inversions. In an inversion, sentences are not written in normal word order. For example, Bradstreet writes “I wakened was with thund’ring noise” instead of “I was wakened with thund’ring noise.” Inversion is often used to make a poem’s rhyme scheme work out or to maintain a fixed meter.

Use the Skill As you read Anne Bradstreet’s poem, underline the places you find inversion.
Here Follow Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House, July 10, 1666

Anne Bradstreet

In silent night when rest I took
For sorrow near I did not look
I wakened was with thund’ring noise
And piteous shrieks of dreadful voice.

That fearful sound of “Fire!” and “Fire!”
Let no man know is my desire.

I, starting up, the light did spy,
And to my God my heart did cry
To strengthen me in my distress

And not to leave me succorless.¹

Then, coming out, beheld a space
The flame consume my dwelling place.
And when I could no longer look,
I blest His name that gave and took,²

That laid my goods now in the dust.

Yea, so it was, and so ’twas just.
It was His own, it was not mine,
Far be it that I should repine;
He might of all justly bereft

But yet sufficient for us left.

When by the ruins oft I past
My sorrowing eyes aside did cast,
And here and there the places spy
Where oft I sat and long did lie:

1. succorless (suk’ar·lis) adj.: without aid or assistance; helpless.
2. that gave and took: allusion to Job 1:21, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”
Here stood that trunk, and there that chest,
There lay that store I counted best.
My pleasant things in ashes lie,
And them behold no more shall I.
Under thy roof no guest shall sit,
Nor at thy table eat a bit.
No pleasant tale shall e’er be told,
Nor things recounted done of old.
No candle e’er shall shine in thee,
Nor bridegroom’s voice e’er heard shall be.

In silence ever shall thou lie,
Adieu, Adieu, all’s vanity.
Then straight I ’gin my heart to chide,
And did thy wealth on earth abide?
Didst fix thy hope on mold’ring dust?

The arm of flesh didst make thy trust?
Raise up thy thoughts above the sky
That dunghill mists away may fly.

Thou hast an house on high erect,
Framed by that mighty Architect,
With glory richly furnished,
Stands permanent though this be fled.
It’s purchased and paid for too
By Him who hath enough to do.
A price so vast as is unknown
Yet by His gift is made thine own;
There’s wealth enough, I need no more,
Farewell, my pelf, farewell my store.
The world no longer let me love,
My hope and treasure lies above.

3. **pelf**: wealth or worldly goods (sometimes used as a term of contempt).
Here Follow Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House, July 10, 1666

**Reading Skills and Strategies: Analyzing Text Structures**

“Upon the Burning of Our House” contains many instances of inversion, in which words appear in an unusual order. The left-hand column of the chart below lists several examples of inversion from the poem. In the right-hand column, write the inverted words or phrases in normal word order.

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Although Anne Bradstreet's "upon the burning of our house" contains some figurative language, it is a good example of the plain style.

**Make it Plain**

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<td>Shabby but beloved, my shoes house my feet as they carry me from place to place. The pen spills ink-blood as it brings words to life.</td>
<td>My shoes are old, brown, kind of worn-out, but comfortable for walking around in. The pen is a blue ballpoint with a leaky tip.</td>
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**Reading Skills: Analyzing Text Structures**

"Upon the Burning of Our House" is filled with inversions. In an inversion, sentences are not written in normal word order. For example, Bradstreet writes "I was weakened with thunders'ning noise" instead of "I was weakened with thunders'ning noise." Inversion is often used to make a poem's rhyme scheme work out or to maintain a fixed meter.

Use the Skill: As you read Anne Bradstreet's poem, underline the places you find inversion.

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**Religious Beliefs**

I will send messages to the earth by the spirits of the people who reach me but whose time to die has not yet come. When their spirits come back into their bodies, they will revive and tell you their experiences. (lines 53–57)

**Customs (what they are, how they are followed)**

He taught the people how to eat and how to hunt the buffalo and catch eagles. He taught them what roots to eat and how to make a good lodge and what to wear. (lines 10–12)

**Social Life**

Coyote was ugly too. The girls did not like him. But he was smart. He could change himself around and trick the women. Coyote got the girls when he wanted. (lines 23–25)
Here Follow Some Verses upon the Burning of Our House, July 10, 1666

Anne Bradstreet

In silent night, when rest I took,  
For sorrow near I did not look  
Racked was with thunders' ring now  
And piteous shrieks of dreadful voice.

5 That fearful sound of "Fire!" and "Fire!"  
Let me know'st my heart did cry  
To strengthen me in my distress.

And not to leave me successless.  
Then, coming out, beheld a space  
The flame consume my dwelling place.

And when I could not longer look,  
I blest His name that gave and took,  
That laid my goods now in the dust.

It was His own, it was not mine,  
Far be it that I should repine;  
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And here and there the places spy  
Where oft I sat and long did lie:  
That vantage may be fly.

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So farewell, pelf, farewell my store.  
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**SKILLS PRACTICE**

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**Before You Read**

World, in hounding me...

by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

**LITERARY FOCUS: SONNET**

A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem that follows a strict structure. The writer Petrarch (1304–1374) created the model for what is now referred to as the Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnet. Here are the characteristics of a Petrarchan sonnet:

- The first eight lines, or octave, ask a question or pose a problem.
- The rhyme scheme of the octave is abba abba. (The first and fourth lines rhyme, as do the second and third, and so on.)
- The last six lines, or the sestet, respond to the question or problem.
- The sestet may contain the rhyme scheme cde cde or cdc cdc.

Sor Juana's "World, in hounding me..." is a Petrarchan sonnet. Note that some of the rhymes are approximate, because of the translation from Spanish to English.

**READING SKILLS: FINDING UNITS OF MEANING**

In many poems the speaker's ideas do not end at the ends of lines. Instead, those ideas may fill up two, three, four, or... you read poetry, look for punctuation clues like commas, periods, and question marks to help you identify units of meaning.

Look at the following example from "World, in hounding me..." The end punctuation clues are circled. The other marks are underlined. This passage from the poem contains two complete thoughts over four lines of poetry.

"World, in hounding me, what do you gain?"
"How can it harm you if I choose, astutely, rather to stock my mind with things of beauty, than waste its stock on every beauty's claim?"

**Use the Skill**

As you read "World, in hounding me...", look for capitalization and punctuation clues that indicate the beginning and ending of the speaker's ideas.
Plain Style

The **plain style** is a way of writing that stresses simplicity and clarity of expression.

DIRECTIONS: Read the selection, and find examples of the four characteristics of plain style. Fill in the chart below with the examples. Answer the questions below to help you analyze the plain style.

**Everyday language**

- Example 1
- Example 2
- Example 3

**Simple sentences**

- Example 1
- Example 2
- Example 3

**Direct statements**

- Example 1
- Example 2
- Example 3

**Biblical references**

- Example 1
- Example 2
- Example 3

**Questions to Help Analyze Plain Style**

1. What other style of writing was popular in England during the time of the Puritans? How was this style different from the plain style?

2. Why does the plain style seem difficult to today’s reader?