

Joanna Baillie

Morgan Matthen, Simon Fraser University

Joanna Baillie (1762-1851) was born in Scotland to father James Baillie, a Presbyterian minister, and mother Dorothea Hunter. Her twin sister died shortly after birth, but she was close with her two older siblings, Agnes and Matthew. Matthew grew up to be a successful physician, and the family lived with him after their father's death. Joanna did not receive a formal education until the age of ten, but her time at boarding school introduced her to theatre and she was a prolific playwright before she was a poet.

The short series of poems entitled "An Address to the Night" appears in Baillie's emotion-centred book, *Poems: Wherein it is attempted to describe Certain Views of Nature and of Rustic Manners; and also, to point out, in some instances, the different influence which the same circumstances produce on different characters*, published in 1790. The four poems in this series, "A Fearful Mind," "A Discontented Mind," "A Sorrowful Mind," and "A Joyful Mind," each take on a different mood and therefore a different perspective on the same environment. The poems bring attention to the ways people's emotions influence their perceptions. In each poem the speaker reflects on their surroundings as they wander through a forest in the night. "A Fearful Mind," a Romantic poem in iambic pentameter, is the first poem in the series. In it Baillie uses negative adjectives and verbs such as "uncertain," "awful," "grim," and "haunts" to create a fearful and uneasy tone. The poem's use of short words and repeated harsh-sounding consonants create the effect of moving quickly to increase feelings of anxiety and suggest the presence of danger. Changes in poetic technique enable Baillie to explore the ways in which our psychological outlook changes our response to identical stimuli, making her poetry both scientific and dramatic.

Further Reading

Norton, M. "The Plays of Joanna Baillie." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 23, no. 90, 1947, pp. 131–143.

Baillie, Joanna. *Wherein it is Attempted to Describe Certain Views of Nature and of Rustic Manners; And Also, to Point Out, in Some Instances, the Different Influence Which the Same Circumstances Produce on Different Characters*. J. Johnson, 1790. Project Gutenberg.

References

- Brown, Susan, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy, eds. Joanna Baillie entry, Writing tab, *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*. Cambridge University Press Online, 2006.
- Gale Group. *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed., vol. 28, Gale, 2008, pp. 23-25. *Gale eBooks*.

“An Address to the Night”: “A Fearful Mind”¹⁰

Uncertain, awful as the gloom of death,
 The Night’s¹¹ grim shadows cover all beneath.
 Shapeless and black is ev’ry object round,
 And lost in thicker gloom the distant bound.¹²
 Each swelling height is clad¹³ with dimmer shades, 5
 And deeper darkness marks the hollow glades.
 The moon in heavy clouds her glory veils,
 And slow along their passing darkness sails;
 While lesser clouds in parted fragments roam,
 And red stars glimmer thro’ the river’s gloom. 10

Nor cheerful voice is heard from man’s abode,
 Nor sounding footsteps on the neighb’ring road;
 Nor glimm’ring fire the distant cottage tells;
 On all around a fearful stillness dwells:
 The mingled noise of industry¹⁴ is laid, 15
 And silence deepens with the nightly shade.
 Though still the haunts of men, and shut their light,
 Thou art not silent, dark mysterious Night.
 The cries of savage creatures wildly break
 Upon thy quiet; birds ill-omen’d ¹⁵shriek; 20
 Commotions strange disturb the rustling trees;

¹⁰ *Project Gutenberg* Ebook Poems. Originally published by J. Johnson, 1790.

¹¹ Capitalized to personify the night.

¹² Boundary.

¹³ Covered.

¹⁴ Although the poem was written during the Industrial Revolution, here, as elsewhere in Baillie’s poems, this means agricultural work activity.

¹⁵ A bird of ill-omen, such as a crow or raven, is a bearer of bad news.

And heavy plaints¹⁶ come on the passing breeze.
 Far on the lonely waste, and distant way,
 Unwonted¹⁷ sounds are heard, unknown of day.
 With shrilly screams the haunted cavern rings; 25
 And heavy treading of unearthly things
 Sounds loud and hollow thro' the ruin'd dome;
 Yea, voices issue from the secret tomb.

But lo! a sudden flow of bursting light!
 What wild surrounding scenes break on the sight! 30
 Huge rugged rocks uncouthly¹⁸ low'r on high,
 Whilst on the plain their lengthen'd shadows lie.
 The wooded banks in streamy brightness glow;
 And waving darkness skirts the flood below.
 The roving¹⁹ shadow hastens o'er the stream; 35
 And like a ghost's pale shroud²⁰ the waters gleam.
 Black fleeting shapes across the valley stray:
 Gigantic forms tow'r on the distant way:
 The sudden winds in wheeling eddies²¹ change:
 'Tis all confus'd, unnatural, and strange. 40
 Now all again in horrid gloom is lost:
 Wild wakes the breeze like sound of distant host:
 Bright shoots along the swift returning light:
 Succeeding shadows close the startled sight.

¹⁶ Complaints.

¹⁷ Strange, unusual.

¹⁸ Unevenly.

¹⁹ Constantly moving.

²⁰ Variant of "shroud."

²¹ Movements of air similar to whirlpools.

Some restless spirit holds the nightly sway: 45
Long is the wild, and doubtful is my way.
Inconstant Night, whate'er thy changes be,
It suits not man to be alone with thee.
O! for the shelt'ring roof of lowest kind,
Secure to rest with others of my hind!²² 50

²² A farm servant or agricultural labourer. "My hind" may indicate the speaker is an employer of hinds.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© Morgan Matthew, 2020

Available from:

<http://monographs.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/sfulibrary/catalog/book/81>