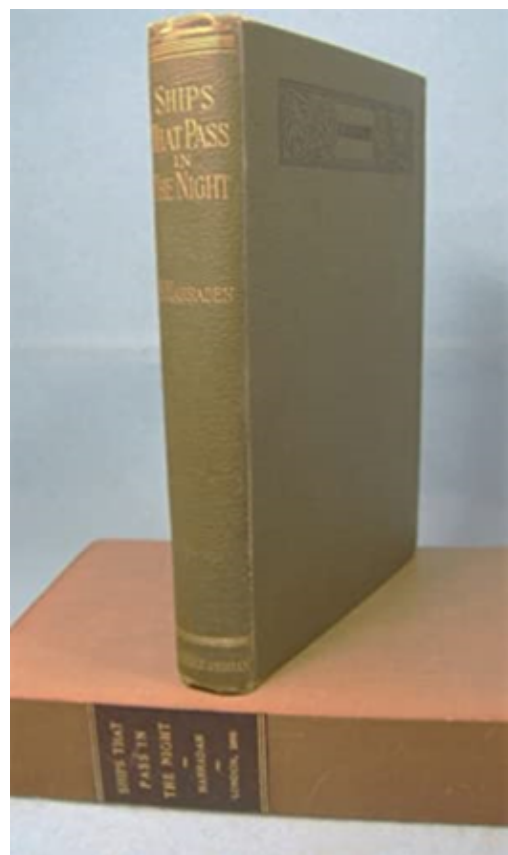


SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT BY BEATRICE HARRADEN – Distant Reading for European Literary History

by Katja Mihurko-Poniz : 7-9 minutes

The seventh article of the *Distant Reading Recommends* series was written by MA students Luminița Andrada Baldovin, Georgiana Aurelia Crivăț, Gianina Drăgan, Diana Florentina Geantă, Andra-Mihaela Vlădoiu under the coordination of Associate Professor Carmen Duțu, PhD, from the *Anglo-American Intercultural Studies* MA program at *Dimitrie Cantemir* Christian University, Bucharest. They wrote about *Ships that Pass in the Night*, a novel by Beatrice Harraden (1893) which, for a short while enjoyed popularity among the public and the attention of literary critics. Although sold in one million copies, the novel soon fell into oblivion.

The text is included in the English corpus of ELTeC. It can be read at <https://distantreading.github.io/ELTeC/eng/index.html>.



Ships that Pass in the Night by Beatrice Harraden

London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1893.

First Edition in the original green cloth, uncut.

Beatrice Harraden

Little known today, Beatrice Harraden (1864–1936) was a rather celebrated British author in her time. She published consistently, including seventeen novels. Favourite topics with her, seemingly based in different ways on her personal experience, are female friendship, music and musicians, and illness. Harraden was very keen to succeed as a writer, having George Elliot (1819-1880) as a role model. In fact, she loved writing so much that, even when she was diagnosed with a severe illness, she made huge efforts travelling to different European and American health resorts in the hope of finding the right treatment. However, this did not prevent her becoming an influential feminist writer and a leader of the suffragette movement. Harraden spent the winter of 1890-1891 in Davos, Switzerland, at a *kurhaus*, where she met John and Agnes Kendall, to whom she dedicated the novel *Ships that Pass in the Night* (1893).



Beatrice Harraden, Wikipedia

Bestseller

Initially rejected by a publisher, *Ships that Pass in the Night* soon became a bestseller, with more than a million copies sold and was later translated into numerous languages, including Japanese. The title of the book is a metaphoric expression for the relationship between the main characters: the ships that pass become an embodiment of a doomed love affair; death puts an end to a journey that has not even begun. The lyrics that mark the beginning of the novel are taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's (1807-1882) poem, *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863). *Ships that pass in the night* is a metaphorical expression that states life's ephemerality. This sad story achieved fame when it was published in 1894, largely on account of its taking title – which suggests the importance of our existence, being evocative in many ways: *ships that pass* express the stages of life, while *in the night* may be seen as nothingness.

For the most part, we are presented with a linear third-person narration, except for the last chapter where the author approaches a first-person (plural) one. It is a love story that follows a young teacher, also a writer and an activist, the very smart and workaholic Bernardine Holme, who falls in love with Robert Allitsen, nicknamed the Disagreeable Man. The story is set in a tuberculosis sanatorium, a *kurhaus*, in Petershof, Switzerland, in a breathtaking landscape, where the two spend almost six months recovering together. Given her precarious financial situation, Bernardine sees no other solution than to return home, in England, leaving Robert behind. The distance makes them realize how much they are in love with each other and they reunite. However, the end of the novel is tragic, as Bernardine suddenly dies in a traffic accident, an ending that certainly takes the reader by surprise. In order to understand the tragic end of the novel, we can go back to Bernardine's philosophy on life and death, revealed in Chapter XVII. There Bernardine states that we shouldn't be ashamed of being in love; and if ever we lose that love, we should be craving to look for it in the "Hereafter", because this is what makes us human. If we don't feel that way, it means we have lost our humanity; as such, the most important thing one should do is that: "We shall go on building our bridge between life and death" (Harraden, XVII). Harraden later explained the painful death of Bernardine: "I felt at the time that [Bernadine] had to die, and that it was in keeping with the irony of life that she, the stronger of the two, should be suddenly swept away" (Harraden 1894, 5-6).

Power of Love

Through the power of love, Robert finds his strength to continue living, despite his temptations to commit suicide, showing once again that love overcomes all problems. Even though the story ends tragically for Bernardine, the immense love that Robert was bearing for her makes him find the internal power and continue his life. Another important theme is invalidity. Harraden criticizes the social world that damages disabled people without taking into account their identities. What the author succeeds in revealing through the true intimacy achieved by Bernardine and Robert is a positive, new and conscious identity and also the friendship that can arise from an apparently ruined life. This new identity took shape in an asylum, in stark contrast to the traditional places in which people discover love. Moreover, while the love of youth has been exploited in a multitude of ways,

the romance of the middle-aged has been seldom explored in literature. The affection that grows between the main characters Robert and Bernardine is mature and assumed.

We feel that this is an extraordinary novel that makes one reflect on the most important aspects of life, the true meaning of life circumstances and the strength to continue the process of life against all odds. Thus, the novel builds on a fundamental theme, the frailty of life, pointing out to the unexpected paths life can take on, the unpredictability of the future, making readers stop and make an inventory of their priorities, reflect upon their goals and dreams and try to make the best of their life as one never knows what tomorrow can bring to you.

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